



by Masterless Sword

Kingdom's Bloodline



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作为新世界的穿越者，李华第一切忌理工男作风，二不是兵王杀手，三做假芯片系统

MY-EM

Kingdom's Bloodline

– Wang Guo Xue Mai –

- Volume 3 -

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Chapter 67

The Winter Solstice

Arc 3: Dancing with the Dragon

[To Zedi, my dear friend and teacher:

It has been half a year since we last corresponded. I cannot wait to share what I have heard and saw in Eternal Star City for the past three months with you.

According to your suggestion and method, I have already overcome what you called the 'Battlefield Abstinence Syndrome'. I can now sleep on beds, I have stopped subconsciously pulling out my sword whenever I hear footsteps behind me, and the noise of blacksmiths striking steel has ceased to make me go into a paranoid state anymore.

My father arranged for me to join the police station and work under his old classmate from his military academy. Have you ever heard of the name 'Horse Slayer' Lord Lorbec Deira?

Relying on the excellent sword skills that you have taught me (do not misunderstand, I am praising you, not boasting about myself), along with the rarely-seen Power of Eradication (I am only boasting about myself in this part), I already became a Class Two Police Officer and the Captain of the Public Security Team when I first started this job. But in my heart, I understand that I was able to get this position mainly because of my last name, Karabeyan.

You would not believe what I went through in a mere three months. There were too many surprises, and I had to straighten them out one by one.

Just as I mentioned before, Constellation is an old but decadent kingdom. Being one of the remnants of the past Empire's bloodline is no longer a glory, but more like a burden.

You can hardly imagine it. In such a place as the capital there are already many cases of disputes and shady deals regarding the administrative power solely within the

police station. Efficiency and efficacy are very low. It is practically unbearable for me, let alone the commoners. This resulted in the street order and some vital operations of a few regions being controlled by gangs. This is because to the people, the gangs' channels of communication are a lot faster, better, reliable and more convenient than the officials'.

Under a coincidence brought by fate, I got acquainted with an informant from the Black Street Brotherhood. It was right under this situation that I got into the life-and-death fight between the two largest gangs of Constellation in the capital. It once again renewed my understanding towards gangs - these people who are not part of the government.

Regardless of the innumerable ordinary class and supra class experts (there were also a few Psionic Warriors who emerged, each of them qualified to earn a place in Legendary Wing's Stardust Unit), there is only one thing that I really care about. Do you still remember those swordsmen you told me about before, who abandoned their initial hearts to wield the sword? The mission that was the cause for the Tower of Eradication's existence?

You mentioned before that their swords had transformed into unadulterated weapons of massacre. Their Power of Eradication had also transformed to the purest form of Death's Power, just like the calamities whom our seniors swore a deathly vow to deal with.

Even though almost a hundred years has passed by since that matter, I truly believe that I met a Swordsman of Eradication outside the tower, just like the 'Disastrous Swordsman' you mentioned.

When facing the violent Power of Eradication that was filled with desire for massacre, the never fading 'Glory of the Stars', which I was extremely proud of, was absolutely no match for it. When that power invaded my body, it was practically... I could not help but think: What kind of lunatic could withstand the Power of Eradication, flowing in every direction within his body?

If I had not received unexpected help, what you would probably be receiving right now is the obituary to my funeral.

In short, I already have the knowledge and I have experienced the Power of Eradication where killing intent and violent rage exist together.

That swordsman came from Blood Bottle Gang. That is right, it is the gang that was established by those two calamities at the end of Mindis the Third's reign over a hundred years ago. Reportedly, one of them is already missing in the capital. I believe that it was the Kingdom's Wrath himself who did the deed. Other than him and his bow, who else in the capital could have been in close proximity to those calamities?

Curiosity made me read a lot of books when I was recovering. I had also read some forbidden books and police records in my father's honor. To my surprise, I discovered the following truth: Mysterious supra class swordsmen of different abilities appeared seventeen times during the hundred years of the Blood Bottle Gang's establishment. The killing and destructive power they showed were not things that could be done by the usual supra class Swordsmen of Eradication. On the contrary, there were similarities with the swordsman I encountered. It seemed like the Disastrous Swordsman I encountered was not the only instance that suddenly appeared.

Here is another inference: When those two calamities secretly established Constellation's Blood Bottle Gang a hundred years ago, the 'Disaster Swords' also committed an act of betrayal and got out of the Tower of Eradication a hundred years ago. They then built a Sword of Eradication beyond our tower as a legacy for future generations. Do these two parties really have no connection at all?

What I am more worried about is, during those hundred years, did the Tower of Eradication really have no knowledge of the relationship between the legacy beyond our tower and Constellation's Blood Bottle Gang? Why have we turned a blind eye on this matter?

By all possible means, Zedi, my beloved teacher, I feel like the answer lies in the truth of the betrayal towards the Tower of Eradication by Crassus and his followers. I need to go back to the Tower of Eradication as soon as possible. At the same time, I am asking you to give me the reading permit of the books of scions.

That is all about Blood Bottle Gang. However, the other gang was not in any way inferior to them: My informant told me that Black Street Brotherhood had a very strange rise to power. They were established during the Bloody Year. At that point of time, they were just a bunch of mercenaries and adventurers who fought to survive with a blade hanging over their heads (even though they were very powerful); approximately within ten years, they had already infiltrated half of Constellation's underworld, and extended their hands towards Eckstedt and Camus Union.

Blood Bottle Gang had the Mystic's glorified name to help them be in charge, and this was also the byproduct of the evil associations between the nobles and bureaucrats. But what was the source for Black Street Brotherhood's emergence? The informant's news entails that they had a very secretive but vigorous support in funding and networking.

Speaking of which, I would like to ask: Have you ever heard of the name 'Black Sword'?

According to urban folklore, he was the leader of Black Street Brotherhood. He was of an elite class and had great skills with the sword. There were some people who claimed that he was very good at hiding, and was the most dangerous king of assassins. There are even some reports from the police station, which say his sword was some sort of cursed antique. It was supposedly equipped with immeasurable ability and power. But one point is certain: He is a supreme class expert. During the past ten years, one supreme class Knight of Eradication and one supreme class Psionic Warrior were suspected to have been murdered by him, as he was there with them when the event happened.

Even though the differences between these supreme class experts were huge, and it was very hard to predict who would win and lose, I still could not help but wonder: Killing two supreme class experts at the same time... is there really a swordsman that powerful outside the Tower of Eradication's watch? I also suspected that he was the descendant of 'Disaster Sword', but he was hostile towards Blood Bottle Gang, and he was under Black Street Brotherhood. This caused me to remain perplexed despite much thought.

An even bigger affair happened during Constellation's National Conference on the day before. Teacher, you may have already received the news from the messenger crows — Constellation now has a legitimate heir. He is not one of the clans or nobles, nor is he from a branch of the royal family. The prince is a real person, named Thales Jadestar. I know that back in the day, the 'Sword of Reversing Light' Prince Horace was your schoolmate. What are your comments on Jadestar? As for me, I witnessed the new, second prince's elegant demeanor behind my father. Although he is only seven years old, I can only say that Jadestar is indeed a part of the royal family.

But this is not the best moment for him to make his appearance. The Jadestar Royal Family is facing some rarely seen stress — The Eckstedt Diplomat Group was murdered in Constellation.

Yes, Zedi, my dear friend and teacher, I once again smell the stench of war. In my father's opinion, regardless of how we try to resolve this, the conflict between the Dragon and Constellation is indeed unavoidable.

Sorry, teacher.

The swordsmen and knights that the Tower of Eradication made much fuss to preserve for humans; these warriors, who previously used their superpowers to open and develop the future of humans, and who once used their Power of Eradication to fighting the calamities, have to once again pick up their swords and battle to death on the battlefield for their respective kingdoms.

If war erupts, I can only pray to the Sunset Goddess, to not let me encounter Croftash and Misadun. I cannot help but tremble when I think of my time in the Tower of Eradication and also when I think of piercing the sword into the hearts of others.

Also, Miranda has already spent three years in Broken Dragon Fortress and she is going to serve in the army with honor and glory under the Fortress Flower. But this also means that, if the war erupts, she will be the first one to face the bloodbath.

Other than that, I also met Raphael in the National Conference. He is now working for the Kingdom's Secret Intelligence Department, and he is also contributing his power to this kingdom.

But please believe me, teacher, your worry will not come to pass. From my enlistment to my service, I have already seen a lot. However, reality will not change me. The ambitions of the other two and mine will never change as well. Especially me, after I went through the cruelest battle. Only then did I begin to realize how precious life is. After I saw the ugliness of this kingdom, the more I long for the arrival of revolution. One day, we will use our own strength to rebuild this gradually outdated and old kingdom.

I hope everything goes smoothly for you, and that you will successfully woo Teacher Chartier as soon as possible!

P.S. It is already winter over here in Constellation, and soon, it will be snowing in Eternal Star City. How is the weather at your place?

— From your faithful friend and student, Kohen Karabeyan

—Calendar of Eradication, year 672, December 16, morning, written at home]

In front of the Everlasting Lamp, Kohen stopped writing and scrutinized his letter for a long time before he sighed.

The blonde policeman hesitated over and over again. Still, he scribbled off the line "He is now working for the Kingdom's Secret Intelligence Department, and also contributing his power to this kingdom", and wrote this instead, "I will confirm his current situation before writing to you again".

He stood up from his desk and glanced outside the window of his family's manor.

It was just six o'clock in the Eastern City District and dawn had just arrived. The visibility of the street was quite high. Even though it was still early, many servants of the nobles were walking around, especially lately when various major events frequently happened in and out of the kingdom.

Kohen shook his head when he thought of this. 'The kingdom indeed has its heir now, but it also caused the confrontation between the royal family and suzerains during the National Conference yesterday. How are they going to resolve the conflict with Eckstedt?'

He did not think that Duke Nanchester, after going through such humiliation, would still answer to the king's call because of his sense of duty. Those petty suzerains of the Western Desert did not seem to be like nobles who worked together during the Kingdom's crisis. The plump Duke of the Eastern Sea was even more infamous for his stinginess. The only people left were the unpredictable teenager, Duchess of Blade Edge Hill and Iris Flowers of South Coast Hill, who changed his stance at the very last minute. However, they were too far away to serve as immediate help.

'So, the first battle will be the burden of the Northern Territory and the Royal Family?'

'Constellation is really like a hydra,' Kohen thought to himself.

He immediately thought of the hydra, Kilika, which was killed by the human hero, Eckstedt's founding king, Raikaru Eckstedt. His mood then became increasingly gloomier.

The sound of horses galloping could be heard from the street outside the window.

A troop of knights were riding their horses out from buildings that were specifically for attending to nobles from abroad.

However, their rhythm in riding the horses and their strength in whipping them were different from the knights, Constellation usually saw.

Constellation's knights were particular about harmony and rhythm while they rode on horseback. Their rhythm was stable and constant, and their whipping was just right.

Yet, these knights were ferocious in their rhythm and they practiced an extremely strong force while they whipped their horses. Nonetheless, their collective pace was precisely united and firmed in discipline.

It had some resemblance to the knights of the Northern Territory.

'Wait a minute.'

Kohen's pupils shrank abruptly!

He saw the flag that the troop of knights held.

Squeak!

Kohen pushed the window open in a rush!

He stuck his head out of the window as he wanted to get a clear look at the flag.

The color of that flag stood out from Constellation's flag.

It had a black base with red outlines, and on top of the flag, there was a roaring red dragon.

The dragon's claws appeared to be ferocious. Its wings were wide opened and its eyes were purely black.

It was indeed a straightforward but fierce style.

The blonde police officer was slightly stunned.

'Did they arrive yesterday after midnight?

'The city gate blocked their entry and made them rest at the inn outside the city, but now they are letting them come into the city?

'Is this His Majesty's idea?'

Suddenly, Kohen felt a chilling sensation on his face. It was freezing enough to make him tremble.

Kohen stretched out his hand to touch his face, and he felt a piece of snowflake on it.

The police officer was stunned.

He stretched his hand out of the window and caught a second and third piece of snowflake.

White, glittering flakes of snow fell down everywhere from the sky above.

It was snowing.

Kohen took a deep breath and glanced upwards to the sky.

Winter had arrived.

...

Early morning.

He woke up from the Renaissance Palace's unique, rock-hard stone bed.

He slid down from the bed, and unsurprisingly stepped onto the freezing cold, stone ground.

It seemed to be colder than yesterday.

A day had passed since the unforgettable National Conference.

Thales felt like he was living in a dream that day.

It was hard to imagine this. That afternoon, he walked one step at a time with Gilbert leading him from the Hall of Stars to the star blue carpet, ignoring the continuous arguments between the king and suzerains behind him.

The nobles, bureaucrats and people on each side were bowing down to him.

They were calling him, "Your Highness".

Thales, Your Highness.

"Are you hallucinating because you are too excited?"

Thales was snapped out of his thoughts abruptly. He lifted his head and saw Jines.

The mature and charming female official leaned against the stone doorframe with her arms crossed as she calmly looked at him.

"No, I am not."

The new Second Prince of Constellation, Thales replied flatly.

"I just feel like the situation is somewhat surreal.

"I am also at a loss."

Jines stared at him as she snorted. "Of course, previously you were just a nobody, but now you are a prince. Prince Thales, the Second Prince of Constellation."

"No, it is not that simple." Thales sighed with a bitter smile on his face. He buttoned up his shirt and grabbed his jacket.

"Previously, I only had to think about how to keep living.

"But from now on... what I need to consider is how to stay alive."

Thales silently replied as he fastened the last button of his leather belt.

Jines furrowed her brows, and then raised them.

'Just another Jadestar.' She silently thought to herself.

'A pitiful Jadestar.'

Thales fastened his leather boots, but that sentence kept replaying in his mind.

"To fight for Constellation, to die for Constellation... and to live for Constellation."

'Am I really ready for this?'

He paused for a short while before fastening the sheathed JC's dagger onto the belt across his lower back.

"Are you ready, Your Highness?" A familiar voice made its way from beyond the door.

Gilbert's figure appeared at the entrance, his face was clouded with an unusual, solemn air.

Jines sighed and made way for the former Foreign Affairs Minister.

Gilbert took off his hat and bowed before Jines as he said to Thales, "Please forgive me for disturbing you from your sleep on just the second day, Your Highness. But... please hurry up in getting ready."

Thales gave him a puzzled look.

Gilbert took a deep breath. "They are coming, Your Highness.

"His Majesty hopes that you will stand by his side and greet those people with him."

"Those people?" Thales asked in confusion.

But he immediately understood what was being said.

The prince also stared solemnly back at Gilbert.

"Yes, those people."

Gilbert nodded and pursed his lips tightly together. He was hesitant, but eventually, with his voice firm and steady, he said, "The Eckstedtians."

Chapter 68

Dominance of the Capable

To the majority of Constellatians, their impressions of the Eckstedtians were of this: Hardy people who also had the ability to withstand extremely cold weather.

However, the second impression may have differed.

Most of the civilians would scratch their heads in uncertainty and say that they were 'barbaric' and 'rude'. Whereas the merchants would merrily utter, 'trustworthy', and 'good business'. The mercenaries and the adventurers would laugh mysteriously and tell you that whether it was for assaults or retreats, the Eckstedtians were the best choice.

Old soldiers who had encountered them, would frown, then sigh after a sip of beer and a puff of tobacco. From the memories that were deeply etched within their memories, they would remind you not to trifle with Eckstedtians.

But based on Thales' knowledge of the Peninsular's history, at least the aristocrats and feudal lords of Constellation held an absolutely different, complex point of view towards this strong northern neighbour.

Being the most powerful nation in the Western Peninsular, Eckstedt possessed intimidating, formidable military might with amazing records of victories in wars. Even among the three strong and credible allies during the Peninsular War, Eckstedt remained a ferocious and dreadful Dragon to the others when the alliance turned confrontational.

In contrast to the orderly and methodically delicate Constellation, this was an intrepid state, filled with romantic and rebellious moods, coupled with heroic and belligerent spirits. Its long tradition traced back even way earlier than the Ancient Empire.

From the remote, uncivilized era where the Northern King established the 'Alliance of All Beasts' with the orcs to the time the Iron Blood King gloriously sacrificed himself during mankind's last defense against the Orcs, the most frigid gust of cold wind had swept past this Northern Territory, which was occupied by humans, waking them up

from their weak, uncivilized age.

During the Age of Feudal Kings, the Final Quiquer War saw two thousand armored human cavaliers charge courageously to the front line in the 'Holiness Exorcism Campaign'. They had to fence off the twenty thousand heavily armed orc soldiers in the final feud to rid themselves off the offenders. Later on, the northern knights gathered under the emperor's flag, with swords and flames raging all over the ground, and conquered the land to establish the Ancient Empire. These various events in the Northern Territory manifested how the human race used their knives and swords to become the most powerful weapons in the world.

In the northern province during the Age of the Empire, the 'Revolutionary King', Quiso's attempt to revolt against the tyrannical emperor may have been relatively unknown in this self-proclaimed, authentic imperial state that was Constellation. However, Thales had read before that the Revolutionary King only led three hundred soldiers in assaulting the Three Great Armies of the Empire when he was old, but he was killed in the glorious, revolutionary attempt. This event indeed aroused the awareness that the seemingly strong and powerful Empire, was in actual fact infested with multiple problems and internal strife. This marked the prelude to civil unrests in the Empire.

An event closer to the contemporary Eckstedt, was none other than the Battle of Eradication, which changed the world. During the darkest and most despair filled moment, the heroic Raikaru and his knights descended from the sky and charged into the enemy's headquarters. This battle was the 'Reversal Gust', which rekindled the flame of hope in revolutionary movements not only in the northern provinces, but also the entire world. It also saved the northern and western fronts, which were in imminent danger, not to mention the chaotic and fragmented post war continent. Together with his nine dedicated knights, he founded the legendary Eckstedt.

Even more recently, the legendary adventures of the Eckstedt born hero Chara, the Oath-keeper Midier and Kaplan the Prophet as well as their alliance during the Third Peninsular War against the Eastern Peninsular Alliance, remained as stories Errolians loved to dwell upon with great relish until now... At least that was the case in Western Peninsular.

In comparison, Constellation resembled an aging gentlemen, encumbered with heavy imperialistic, orthodox beliefs. Even the nation's founding story was filled with bitterness and sorrow. Eckstedt, on the other hand, was more like a robust young

warrior that flourished with resistance and heroism, one who would charge without fear, and die without regrets.

With that spirit, an Eckstedtian was now before Thales.

Ignoring the hostile gaze of the officials and aristocrats from Constellation in the hall, Baron Lassalle Wieder, the emergency envoy from Eckstedt, stood upright in Renaissance Palace, which was adjacent to the conference hall in the Hall of Stars.

Standing casually, with both arms folded and his head lowered, he occasionally lifted his head up to sweep his view around the hall, but this was done with grace and not the slightest rudeness. Seemingly, this was his nature, however the inconspicuous smile on his face did make the spectators frown.

Lassalle appeared to only be slightly over forty years old, and as he held a red-colored dragon print scroll in his hand, Lassalle showed no signs of fear instead, he looked somewhat arrogant. When his antagonistic eyes swept through the hall, people in the hall who met his gaze had the false impression that this Eckstedtian was giving them haughty looks instead of them staring and judging his envoy.

Under this circumstance, Thales pursed up his lips tightly, stood by Gilbert's side at a concealed and inconspicuous location, which was a few stairs up, beside the king of Constellation's seat.

Those present in the hall, ranged from the six dukes from the Six Great Clans, who had identical expressions, the thirteen counts from the Distinguished Families, to the various officials participating in the conference: Chief of Intelligence Morat Hansen, Minister of Finance Gill Mahn, Military Advisor Shaun Ritter and so on, all stood quietly besides the king's seat.

The entire center of power within Constellation was waiting for King Kessel the Fifth to speak as he sat on his throne.

Yet, King Kessel the Fifth's sky blue eyes were carefully observing the emergency envoy dispatched by Eckstedt when Prince Moriah was assassinated.

To be able to cross the borders from Dragon Cloud City nonstop and head straight to Eternal Star City in just six days showed just how urgent the matter was, and what the attitude this envoy possessed.

"What have you brought, envoy of the Northern Dragon?" King Kessel's voice travelled through the air.

"Me? Hmph. I personally have brought nothing." Eckstedt's emergency envoy Lasalle laughed briefly, but all of a sudden, his expression turned cold. "Very soon, all of Eckstedt will bring their griefs, their despairs, and also...

"Their fury!"

The entire conference hall turned dead silent.

Baron Lasalle stared intensely at King Kessel without backing down even the slightest.

During the suffocating silence, just as Thales wondered who would be the first to bring up the main subject, Kessel the Fifth broke the silence.

"I know you."

The king uttered slowly, his dignified voice spread to the entire conference hall. "Twelve years ago, the current Archduke of Black Sand, who was then Count Chapman Lampard and also the count for a single city, represented Eckstedt to visit Constellation as the son of the Archduke—you held the reigns to his horse in that diplomatic group."

"Hmm?"

Astounded by Kessel's good memory, Lasalle frowned a little.

Then, he laughed lightly.

Lasalle's laughter was filled with an irritating, mocking tone. "What an amazing memory, Your Majesty. I too remember very clearly, you were only the fifth prince then. You stood at a corner, all alone."

With his hands behind his back, he walked forward and continued, "...Look at Chapman Lampard. He strongly proposed to the old, grey-haired King Aydi, who had suffered a great deal by constant rebellious unrest. As long as they returned the five counties, which originally belonged to the Northlanders back to their rightful masters...

"Eckstedt will generously dispatch an army down south to help quell the intensifying rebellious unrests that have been plaguing our neighbors for six hundred years."

Many frowned upon hearing this.

Suffering a great deal from the constant rebellious unrest – the Bloody Year. Thales recalled this event.

But Thales also took note that this envoy had placed emphasis on Northlanders before Eckstedt.

'What was the implication?'

"Well, I remember King Aydi had politely declined Grand Duke Lampard's so called 'proposal'." Duke Fakenhaz sneered. "Yet, you still 'generously' sent your army to the south... What a good neighbor you have been!"

Lasalle smiled mysteriously without saying a word.

Count Zemunto said angrily, "Maybe Archduke Lampard was not so literate. Those five counties you mentioned, have been respectively ruled by the Arunde, Zemunto and Friess Families. Our ancestors owned those lands ever since the founding of Constellation—those are indisputably Constellation's lands!"

Out of Thales's expectation, Lasalle laughed.

Under the angry eyes of the entire hall, his soft laugh gradually turned into a big hearty laugh.

"All these years, cold winds have been getting stronger and more frigid in Eckstedt. Our shepherds and hunters have to tolerate this bitter cold weather when they are out. When they return, they have to use snow to vigorously rub their nearly frostbitten hands to prevent their hands from freezing."

Most people could not grasp what he was trying to say. Lasalle laughed grimly. "Year after year, decade after decade, we managed to turn our trembling hands, which were only good for wielding whips and holding bows into steady and strong arms, fit to brandish powerful swords."

Lasalle paused momentarily and looked around before he laughed unscrupulously. "In

comparison, the weather in Constellation is getting warmer and more comfortable, well suited for weaklings, who are only good at gasping for breath on women's bellies. Such is the descendant of the Oath Keeper Midier!"

This instantly caused an uproar in the hall.

Thales was shocked. How could a visiting envoy choose to abuse and insult the host rather than get into the main subject?

Somehow, he reckoned that so far as the incident of the prince's assassination was concerned, Constellation was in an absolutely disadvantageous position. Besides, from the parliamentary meeting the day before, one could easily gauge Constellation's military might and strength.

Henceforth, it looked like Eckstedt held complete reigns over whether they wanted to hold Constellation accountable, when they wanted to hold Constellation accountable, and how they wanted to hold Constellation accountable over the incident.

Thales heaved a sigh.

Count Friess slammed his hand on the sword hanging by his waist, and with rage burning in him, he asked, "What are you getting at?"

But Kessel the Fifth calmly waved his hand, waving off the enraged nobles who were about to rush forth.

"What I am saying is, since when did the lousy excuse of the land belonging to my grandfather valid to set the standard for claiming land ownership?"

Lasalle took a circular stroll in the hall, and met the gazes of Constellation's aristocrats and feudal lords with his fearless stare.

Lasalle spoke with a hostile expression, "Regardless of Eckstedt or Constellation, the strong and the victor would only leave after claiming his spoils of war, while the weak or loser would have to give up his gambling chips to protect himself. Every inch of land has to be conquered, these are the international laws. Just as Senjem, the King of Mountains of the East Peninsular said: only the able shall dominate."

Only Gilbert and a few others slightly shut their eyes, pondering what his intentions were. King Kessel looked as if he was in deep thought while he swept his sight across

the nobles in the hall.

Gilbert whispered to Thales, "Be careful, Prince Thales. In diplomatic affairs, there should not be any meaningless arguments or exchanges. This is actually a test and a change of steps before the official clash of swords. The opponent is probing our steps and our ability, before finally making his first sword strike.

"The fact that he did not urgently dive into the main subject, implies that he may not have good grounds to put forward conditions, but it is also probable that he has some even better points for negotiation."

Gilbert continued softly, "Up till now, this is his plot: By infuriating and directing us towards the topics of military strength and the rules of the strong versus the weak, he is planting a seed in our thoughts. At the same time, he is gauging our response to determine his next move. Moreover, when he finally brings up the real topic of discussion, we would lean towards the tendency of thinking about war, unconsciously placing more importance in the value of war and hence, neglecting other equally important alternatives."

'Do we have other choices?' Thales frowned.

Lasalle step forward and stared at King Kessel with a burning gaze. "Does Constellation have the ability to guard and defend your so-called territory?"

The anger and rage among the aristocrats had now reached the limit.

With extreme rage and a swift tap on his northern military uniform, the Northern Count Zemunto shouted, "Bring it on, bring on your army—"

But his words were immediately cut off by an even more firm and stable voice!

"All right..."

Val Arunde had on a composed smile. His firm voice drowned out Zemunto's and echoed throughout the conference hall. "Very well, as the Duke of the Northern Territory, I was actually worried about my territory not being big enough! Since Grand Duke Lampard desires our five counties in the north, and I have been wanting his Black Sand Region, then how about we dispatch our troops and exchange out territories based on our capabilities?"

Upon the Northern Duke's rebuttal, Eckstedt's emergency envoy frowned slightly but soon smiled afterwards.

"The Duke of the Northern Territory has given a very good response, but what Count Zemunto said earlier may have exposed some information to the opponent," Gilbert solemnly reported to the second prince of Constellation.

Thales nodded. He understood. In the face of provocation, Count Zemunto challenged the opponent to a fight, whereas Val chose to declare his intention to conquer his opponent's land. The meanings behind their words and their attitudes as well as their resolve towards being invaded instantly showed a big difference.

Right at this moment, a young girl's gentle voice interrupted the ongoing conversation.

"The able shall dominate? If this is the case, then that Archduke of Black Sand should rise to arms soon, get rid of your King Nuven, and capture the throne."

Upon hearing this, Lasalle's facial expression turned drastically.

"Because I do believe that he is actually stronger than King Nuven, is he not? To fight the South, he has to face an entire empire, but to fight the north, he only has a king to deal with. Why not give it a try? Perhaps, he will succeed."

Under the astounded eyes of the spectators, the fifteen-year-old Duchess of Blade Edge Hill, Lyanna Tabark sat among the male suzerains like a lone flower on the cliff. She continued coldly, "Why don't you bring these words to the Grand Duke Lampard of Black Sand? Just as Senjem the King of Mountains said, 'Only the capable shall dominate'."

Chapter 69

Creator of Bad Precedence (One)

In the hall, the senior ministers and suzerains began to whisper among themselves, even smiles could be seen on some of their faces.

Duke Cullen laughed heartily and whispered to the 'unpopular' Duke Fakenhaz, "She's a good girl. Did she learn to be so biting with her words from you?"

"Biting with her words? Not at all," Cyril Fakenhaz said softly with warped lips, and he giggled with a sinister smile. "To me, this is a woman's natural ability."

Back in the hall, Lasalle's facial expression froze, and then he burst out in anger. "So, is it Constellation's style to use this sort of method to sow discord between Eckstedt's king and his subjects? It is just like how you have shamelessly and despicably plotted to murder our Prince Moriah!"

Thales' heart lurched in his chest. 'Here comes the "main course".'

His statement caused most of Constellation's nobles in the hall to feel indignant and angered.

Yet, there were few who fell into deep thought.

Before Thales could respond, Gilbert spoke with a praising smile, "The duchess' reaction is commendable. We have unknowingly launched a counter attack. Your Highness, Duchess Tabark's attack should bring us some positive results."

Thales turned around and looked at the elegant duchess.

Lyanna also seemed to have sensed Thales' gaze, and turned around to return it with a fierce stare. It was as sharp as a blade.

Thales hastily delivered a smile, then took a quick glimpse around the hall, pretending like nothing had happened, as if his gaze on the duchess earlier was actually unintentional.

"This is not as simple as merely sowing discord. It helps to probe into whether King Nuven and the Duke of Black Sand have uniform wills as well as objectives. This is very important!"

Thales was dumbfounded.

Gilbert continued patiently, "The fact that Lasalle abruptly reverted back to the main subject is an indication. Obviously, he also knows that he better not get entangled in the subject of who is stronger between King Nuven and the Archduke of Black Sand.

"In the first round, he was the one who was forced to strike first."

Recalling Gilbert's inference in the carriage earlier, Thales suddenly realized that the assassination of the Eckstedt Diplomat Group could have been a deliberate attempt of certain people in their own country.

'Looks like... though there is no evidence, but... no matter what...

At least, in the minds of most people, the discord between King Nuven and the Archduke of Black Sand was quite huge.

He returned his gaze to the hall.

The One-Eyed Dragon of Nanchester snorted. "We murdered your prince? Even an idiot would be able to tell that the assassination of your diplomatic group was a plot to stir up warfare between our countries—Is Eckstedt going to be used so easily and willingly? Even my hunting hounds are not as obedient as you are!"

"Constellatiates, do you think we really care whether you are an innocent bystander or the instigator?" Lasalle spoke slowly.

"Since you are not interested in finding out the truth, why are you here? How about you just behead some of the people on the streets and give it back to your King Nuven?" Duke Zayen of South Coast Hill said sarcastically.

These words did not fail to stir up Lasalle's burning rage and enmity. Under the watchful eyes of the nobles, he strode forward, then held the Crimson Dragon sealed scroll up high in his right hand!

On the throne, King Kessel clenched both his fists and lowered his chin. His gaze

turned gloomy and abstruse.

"No matter who despicably murdered the prince—we swear to destroy them! Eckstedt will uphold justice ourselves, we do not need anybody else!

"But our prince, the only son and heir of the Archduke of Dragon Cloud City and the Common-Elected King of Eckstedt, died in Constellation's territory!"

Lasalle spread his arms, vigorously turned and ruthlessly gazed at each and every suzerain, noble and official in the hall.

"His last drop of blood fell on the land of Constellation, the last breath he took was the air in Constellation, the last scene he saw was the scenery in Constellation. He came to Constellation with good will, yet all of you could not and did not protect him!

"Regardless of whether he was killed intentionally or not, it was your incompetence and your conniving attitude which have caused his death.

"That is good enough!

"Constellation should be responsible for it, and should pay the price!"

Angrily, Lasalle tore open the seal from the Crimson Dragon sealed scroll. Then, he swiftly unfurled it!

"No matter what, King Nuven and Eckstedt must obtain some form of justification from Constellation!"

The six dukes almost frowned simultaneously!

Thales' pupils contracted, only to see that the fully written scroll had no signature or a seal stamp.

It only had a palm print.

A bright red palm print.

Could it be King Nuven's bloody palm print?

Commotion returned to the hall!

"I saw it with my own eyes. He did not sign it, he did not put a seal. He just cut his palm and pressed it down to make a palm print!

"This is King Nuven's anguish and despair! Do you understand now, Constellatiates?!"

The last few words uttered were as if they were spat out through Lasalle's teeth.

The commotion in the hall began to gradually subside.

Prior to this, Thales did not care much about the assassination of the Eckstedt Diplomat Group. The death of the foreign prince, who was a total stranger to him caused no pain to him. Yet now, he finally realized the seriousness of this matter.

The supreme king's sonorous voice rose up once again.

"I can comprehend King Nuven's despair and anger. Believe me, I have experienced that sort of feeling, and Constellation will definitely not evade its responsibility."

Kessel spoke in an indifferent manner.

The One-Eyed Dragon Koshder gnashed his teeth, though in a barely noticeable manner.

'Is the king about to yield?

'Is it possible? How would the Northern Ferocious Dragon be fully satisfied unless we pay a hefty price for cutting off a big chunk of 'meat' from our Northern Territory?

'If we give in, King Kessel will end up being labelled incompetent and weak. Moreover, we will be destined to have our relationship with the Northern Territory sour even further. They are not exactly good friends of ours now.'

As he thought about these things, he could not help but look at Val Arunde, who was in full military uniform, frowning but keeping absolute silence.

It seemed as if this was the calm before a storm.

Lasalle put down his hand and continued coldly, "Thank you for your understanding, Your Majesty. Oh yes, I remember now. Hoho, if it is you, whatever you say, we can understand."

Strange looks appeared among those presented in the hall.

"Cut the nonsense. What are King Nuven's conditions?" Kessel ignored his underlying mocking words and asked him outright.

Under the watchful eyes of the people, Lasalle let out a steely harrumph, pulled out the scroll again and began reciting its contents.

"All subjects of Eckstedt, from His Majesty Nuven to the nine archdukes, upon learning of the tragedy, while bearing horrific sorrow and despair, we used our utmost rationale as well as intellect, and unanimously deem that Constellation must be held accountable for Prince Moriah Charleton's misfortune."

Finishing this statement, Lasalle looked up and glanced at the whole hall once over.

"It is fair. It is Constellation's shame that the dignified Prince Moriah met with such misfortune in this country."

Lasalle narrowed his cold eyes a little, then lowered his head to continue reciting from the scroll.

"Number One, to appease the deceased, Constellation must arrange to return the remains of our Diplomatic Group, especially that of Prince Moriah, in the most dignified, respectable, and glorious manner.

"Number Two, to uphold justice, Constellation must provide assistance in our investigation and surrender the murderer, including the mastermind behind this."

Fakenhaz let out a light snort and grumbled to Duke Cullen, who was by his side, "Assist them? My god, this sounds more like a superior giving orders to his subordinate."

However, being laden with anxiety, the latter only stared at Lasalle with a solemn gaze.

Eckstedt's Emergency Diplomat's recital still went on.

"Number Three, to restore honour, we would like King Kessel to personally extend a public apology to the entire Eckstedt."

Thales lifted his brows.

Gilbert's statement reappeared in his mind.

"It does not matter whether we fight or choose to form an armistice, His Majesty will not be able to escape from being criticized as a cold-hearted and ruthless king who disregards his people, oppresses the weak, and embarrasses Constellation. This will greatly impact His Majesty and Jadestar Family's reputation and influence in the kingdom."

But Lasalle was still delivering his blunt and ruthless speech.

"Number Four, to compensate for damage or loss, whether it be lands or resources, we expect to be reasonably and adequately compensated. Specifically, Eckstedt expects compensations in the forms of: (i) the two northern prefectures, which are adjacent to our kingdom, and land the size of which shall be not less than that of the Pine Nut County, or (ii) a third of the preferential quota of the premium Eternal Oil from the Eastern Sea Coast of the whale hunting industry in Constellation, or (iii) two tenths of the preferential quota of the Crystal Drop Ore Mine at the Southern Coast Territory of Constellation. Any one of the three.

"Number Five, to uphold equality, the 'Fortress Treaty' needs to be revised by both Constellation and Eckstedt, especially the nonsensical boundary lines drawn twelve years ago. Pine Nut County, Sharladan County, Levor County, Bear County and Deer Cry County must be unconditionally returned to Eckstedt's rule. The Duke of Watch City will withdraw his land cultivation team from the Northern Pine Forest, and the number of hunters as well as herdsmen allowed into the Pine Forest annually can only be decided after consultation with the Archduke of Black Sand. The Duke of Lonely Old Tower shall have his patrol guards pulled backwards by three kilometers. They shall not unreasonably deny Eckstedtians from entering the public hunting zone."

The hall was so quiet that even the sound of a needle dropping could be heard.

But Thales knew that this was only on the surface.

Lasalle slowly put the scroll down.

"As mentioned above, these are the conditions stipulated by King Nuven and by Eckstedt."

Suddenly, the dreadful silence in the hall was broken.

"What crap are you talking about?"

Unable to take it any longer, Count Zemunto shouted, "Watch City will not retreat even one step! What is more, we will definitely not surrender Pine Nut County and Bear County! Go and tell that bastard in the Black Sand Region: if he wants our land, he will have to come and get it with his troops!"

Count Friess also spoke coldly, "Deer Cry County shall also remain the same! Besides, Lonely Old Tower will patrol wherever he wishes!"

Nevertheless, the Duke of the Northern Territory, who had the most authority to speak, chose to maintain silent. He gazed attentively at King Kessel the Fifth.

The people in the hall turned their sights towards the supreme king with varying expressions.

Kessel stared upon the steps under his feet, as if what had happened was rather trivial, and spoke with a calm face, "Nuven, oh Nuven... Eckstedt is definitely too voracious to think that it could make use of the dead prince in exchange for our seven counties."

Not taking this insult lying down, Lasalle lifted his head and stared straight at Kessel. "The damage to Eckstedt is not the loss of a prince per se, it is also damage done to our honour and dignity!"

"Our diplomatic group came here in good will, but was shoddily treated! Who then will vindicate the humiliation Eckstedt has suffered? Who is going to tame the Great Dragon's flames of fury?"

"What is more, Constellation, what you all took away was the only son to a father!" Lasalle continued with utmost fury. "The sole legitimate and true heir to the throne, who had come with a mission for friendship and peace, but died due to a despicable assassination!"

"King Nuven lost his kin, his only son, his sole heir. Eckstedt lost the next Archduke of Dragon Cloud City, the future of the Walton Family!"

In the end, Lasalle roared.

"Even with such a devastating blow, King Nuven did not send an army but only put up some conditions. Is this not the most rational and restrained choice?"

The hall was then filled with inhales of discontentment among the nobles.

Kessel maintained his calm tone, yet with a voice that allowed no argument, he said, "The first three conditions can be fulfilled, but the fourth and fifth..."

The King's voice rang coldly across the hall. "Constellation will never allow me to cut off our land, or prepare to surrender the quota of our resources. If we say that, what are you going to do?"

Val began to frown.

Duke Cullen sighed deeply, while Fakenhaz let out an unpleasant bark of laughter.

Lyanna and Zayen pursed their lips tight and kept absolutely quiet.

Thales lowered his heart in agony. 'Can war not be prevented?'

'Hahahaha, King Kessel.' Lasalle laughed in extreme anger. "When we came to Eternal Star in the past, King Aydi similarly rejected the requests we brought forth on behalf of King Nuven and the nine archdukes.

"What happened after that?" Lasalle spread his arms wide open and again peered around the hall.

Many of the older suzerains, nobles and officials tensed up.

"Yes, we 'generously' dispatched our army."

With accelerated breathing and an even more icy facial expression, Lasalle continued, "Whatever that rightfully belongs to him, the Great Dragon will come and get it himself."

Everyone in the conference hall began to ponder the consequences of this statement.

Twelve years ago, the chaos and disaster of war involving most of Constellation remained vivid in their minds.

"When righteousness cannot be upheld, and justice turns to dust..."

Lasalle raised his right hand in an oppressive manner and slowly clenched his fist.

"Then Eckstedt will have no choice but to use war to safeguard our honour and His Majesty's dignity."

He threatened.

"By then, the problem will not be easily resolved with a few counties or some Eternal Oil."

"Enough!"

Kessel replied in a seemingly profound manner.

"Is there no other method to properly resolve the grievance between Constellation and the Great Dragon in your eyes and King Nuven's?"

"Do you really wish to witness bloodshed between the subjects of the two countries' borders?"

Lasalle responded quickly. "Your Majesty, war or peace, it is all up to you. To tolerate humiliation for the sake of your subjects, or go to war at all costs?"

He swept his icy gaze across the ministers, particularly Count Zemunto, then laughed sarcastically. "Especially when your Northern Territory does not even have sufficient military strength to defend Broken Dragon Fortress from the Black Sand Archduke's army?"

The Duke of the Northern Territory clenched his fist tightly.

Gilbert whispered into Thales' ear with a sigh, "During the Bloody Year, the Northern Territory was dealt a great blow when faced with the powerful vanguards of Eckstedt, second only to the damage suffered by Blade Edge Hill in the southwest. There was a time when widows outnumbered children in the Northern Territory."

"You are asking me to make a decision when faced with such a difficult choice?" Kessel let out a cold harrumph. "You might as well just get Constellation a new king!"

"Your Majesty, you are the Supreme King of Constellation. You are destined to shoulder this responsibility." Lasalle raised his head with a smile.

"If you cannot do it, then as you have said, you might as well choose a more capable

individual to be the leader of Constellation from this hall full of nobles. Eckstedt will be more than happy to see this done."

The entire conference hall rose into a commotion within an instance.

Some even cursed aloud.

Nonetheless, Eckstedt's emergency envoy was not done with his talking!

Lasalle continued sinisterly, "In any case, the next King of Constellation is also destined to not be from Jadestar, is he not?"

Many of the nobles looked at Kessel oddly, but even more looked to Thales.

Was this envoy still ignorant about the National Conference?

Suddenly, Thales understood something!

'As expected, the assassination of the diplomatic group, the pressure by the suzerains to abdicate the throne, the arrival of the Great Dragon's Diplomat—all these are intertwined. This would have been a meticulous scheme, if not for my appearance. Just as Gilbert had speculated, there are people from both sides of Constellation and Eckstedt working together, conspiring to wrest the ownership of the throne of Constellation from the Iron Hand King.'

But why did Kessel, his father, lead the subject of conversation to this particular point?

The words that traveled into his ear made Thales' heart jump in fright.

In the hall filled with astounded individuals, Kessel lifted his head and gazed at Lasalle. "In that case, Eckstedt, or rather the nobles of Eckstedt would be more in favor of a certain Constellation noble to be Constellation's supreme king?"

"Allow me to speak the truth." Lasalle laughed contemptuously. "There is none present here that meets our expectation.

"Eckstedtians only admire heroes of war, even if they are our enemies.

"Is there anyone among you who fulfills this requirement?"

Kessel sighed, though no one knew why he did so. "Of course, my vassals are either too far away or unwilling to launch their troops. Then, the only people who would qualify are those who must fight for their own territory, am I right?"

The hall suddenly turned silent upon the king's peculiar statement.

Lasalle sensed that something was astray. He looked to a person, gradually showing doubts on his face.

'Something is wrong. King Kessel... He is... '

Just when everyone was puzzled about the present situation, the plump Duke Cullen seemed to have realized something else. He exhaled deeply, and also looked towards the same person. His face showed extreme agony.

From Thales amazed expression, Gilbert suddenly realized what was going on. After a brief sigh, he gritted his teeth and lowered his head to let loose a sigh.

Under the entire hall's bewilderment and surprise, King Kessel took a deep breath, closed his eyes and said, "So, that is how it is."

The king whispered, "From collaborating with Eckstedt's ambitious individuals to provoking conflict through a diplomat assassination plot.

"To personally declare to me the feasibility of war and propose to issue the final general edict.

"Then, to incite the suzerains, who have been eagerly waiting for a chance to pressure me into naming the heir, causing us to be embroiled in internal confrontation while you watch by the sides.

"And finally to this Eckstedt envoy, who forced me into a dilemma, which could cost me dearly.

"In the end, you will successfully instigate war, and you would be able to easily gain recognition in the battlefield after conspiring with Eckstedt, and ultimately abdicate me.

"To achieve your motive, you would not hesitate to sacrifice your land, your people and even your country.

"Is that not so... traitor?"

Each of the supreme king's words were more startling than the last.

Thales also began breathing more quickly in the process of listening to his speech.

Suddenly, the Iron Hand King, Kessel the Fifth opened his eyes. He looked towards a corner of the hall with a desolate gaze, at an individual who had kept quiet for a long while.

At this juncture, the king eyes were filled with misery and anguish.

"So, it is you."

He spoke slowly.

"Mastermind of all plots and schemes"

The king's low and muddled voice uttered a name, which was previously unimaginable by anyone.

"Val Arunde."

Chapter 70

Creator of Bad Precedence (Two)

The conference hall was in a state of full commotion.

Even Lasalle was frowning.

This time around, other than Duke Cullen and Gilbert, all the nobles cast amazed looks upon the Duke of the Northern Territory, who had been keeping absolutely quiet until now.

What was this about?

"Your Majesty? Duke Arunde?" Being one of the suzerains of the Northern Territory too, Count Zemunto was puzzled and looked at the Duke of the Northern Territory as well as the king with an uncertain gaze.

Whereas the disbelieving Count Friess simply stared blankly at Val.

The commotion and uproar lasted well over ten seconds until the suzerain of Cold Castle, Guardian Duke of the Northern Territory, the firm and resolute looking Val Arunde lifted his head and turned around to look at the king.

He no longer remained silent, but chose to let out a long sigh.

Under the gazes of all the amazed onlookers, including that of Baron Lasalle, Val, the master of the White Eagle Family, the man who was like a determined warrior, lifted his head and smiled.

"You are as sharp as ever, Kel."

Lowering his head a little, the Duke of the Northern Territory sighed. "Just like your damn elder brother."

Thales' eyes were wide with shock.

'What?'

This prompted immediate reactions from all the people.

'Judging from the Duke of Northern Territory's reaction...

'My God.

'But how can this be?'

Kessel lowered his head and truly sighed.

"Are you not going to provide some explanations for us, Val?" the king asked blandly.

"What is there to explain? It failed, did it not?" Unperturbed and not in the least concerned about the other suzerains' gazes on him, Val continued, "And you, when did you actually see through this?"

"It was obvious that the slaying of the diplomat group was done by the other suzerains, was it not? I have appeared very innocent, and both the Northern Territory as well as the royal family were clearly victims of this scheme."

Zayen stared at Val in disbelief.

'That is right. It is impossible. The assassination of the diplomat group was done by the united efforts of the nobles in New Star!

'Moreover, the Duke of the Northern Territory was not even in our group!'

With a lowered gaze, Kessel spoke in a soft voice, "During the National Conference yesterday, you were in too much of a hurry to cast your vote against Thales during the voting process of the Higher Parliament Conference."

The king's voice was filled with complex emotions. "That was when I became suspicious of you. You should know that even when Koshder offered to provide military support to help you as a bargaining chip for your vote, I would definitely not just sit back and watch the Northern Territory fall to ruin. There should not be any reason for you to object to my son as the successor just based on the One-Eyed Dragon's promise."

The One-Eyed Dragon, Duke Koshder, looked at the Duke of the Northern Territory in amazement. At the same time, he remembered the voting held during the afternoon of the previous day.

"Is that so?" Val put on a sad smile. "How do you know that I have no reason? You know I hate you very much, do you not?"

"I should be the person you detest because of Liscia." King Kessel spoke with an expressionless face, but underneath his sleeves, his fists trembled slightly, though it went unnoticed by all. "You are a noble man, you would not take it out on my son."

At this point, most people turned to look at Thales, especially Count Lasalle, who had a face as dark as thunderclouds.

"Unless you have a special reason that makes it absolutely necessary for you to stop my son from being the heir." The king continued in a low voice.

Under all the complicated gazes in the hall, Val sighed. "But this is merely a guess. Perhaps this is only a coincidence."

The king lifted his head and spoke with a detached voice, "That is why I tested the diplomat of Eckstedt today."

"Hmm." Val smiled coldly. "Certainly, after the Bloody Year, you have become very skeptical."

Ignoring what he said, the king carried on.

"Lyanna was able find out that he was a subordinate of Archduke Lampard with just a couple of words. Only Lampard's subordinates would be so anxious to change the topic of conversation so as not to expose Archduke Lampard's evil ambition."

Without saying a word, the Duchess of Blade Edge Hill looked at the Duke of the Northern Territory coldly.

"When he first got here, he put up an act with you. He looked as if he was a diplomat who did not know much about the Northern Territory's military strength, and he was trying to gauge the defensive abilities of Constellation's Northern Territory. You counterattacked without backing down. By the looks of it, he was trying to stir up a confrontational atmosphere, according to what was planned," Kessel the Fifth

continued with a somber voice.

"But when I deliberately refused to make a clear choice between war and conciliation, he was very clear in threatening me by saying that the Northern Territory does not even have sufficient military strength to defend Broken Dragon Fortress... At that instant, he showed that he was well versed about the Northern Territory.

"Do you not think that this is very contradictory?

"It was then that my suspicion intensified."

Lasalle's face turned pale in an instant.

The king lowered his head and he went on. "Moreover, he was clearly more interested in agitating me, provoking me, and to some extent, he had more interest in replacing me as the King of Constellation than helping King Nuven strive for better benefits for Eckstedt.

"Is it not sufficient for Lampard to procure lands in the Northern Territory? Why was he still so interested in me and in replacing the Jadestar Royal Family? Evidently, he was collaborating with someone from Constellation, and my crown was the collaborators' aspiration.

"The question is, who is qualified to work together with Eckstedt's powerful nobles and the Archduke of Black Sand? Who can he work with to be able to gain mutual benefits and obtain a win-win situation?

"I have pondered over this for a long time. I have considered Nanchester, Covender, Cullen and even Fakenhaz. Originally, the least likely person was you, Val. Because when war erupts, the Northern Territory would be the first to be affected. So, together, you and I will be the pitiful targets of their plot, the sacrifices."

Fakenhaz's sharp voice rang in the air. "Heh, heh. Unless, of course, he volunteers to be a sacrifice."

Kessel the Fifth looked at Val Arunde with a gaze as piercing as blades.

"However, when I looked at it from another angle, what can Archduke Lampard gain? If King Nuven's only son died in the Northern Territory, then the Walton Family would be 'out of the race' in the next King Selection Congress.

"Therefore, Lampard would be able to obtain the land in the Northern Territory and the death of an opponent in the Northern Territory.

"In Constellation, who would have the highest amount of power to ensure the occurrence of these two events simultaneously?"

With grief on his face, Kessel slowly lifted up his head.

"That would be you, Val Arunde, the person who controls the Northern Territory—the Guardian Duke of the Northern Territory.

"But I still cannot believe it. I would rather believe that this is just a coincidence."

The Duke of the Northern Territory replied, "No. In truth, you believed it long before this. You simply used every single method in your disposal to verify your suspicion, did you not?"

The king let out a light snort and cast a profound look at Eckstedt's emergency envoy.

"Before this, my men intercepted Count Lasalle and sent them directly to East City District with all the other suzerains knowing about this clearly. Up until this morning, the hidden sentries of the Secret Intelligent Department ensured their absolute seclusion from any Constellatiate, and also made sure that they did not know about yesterday's National Conference as well as the appearance of an heir. They are also ignorant of the fact that their collaborator in Constellation is already in a sorry plight.

"Take a guess, under this situation, how many batches of people have the hidden sentries of the National Secret Intelligent Department intercepted for wanting to liaise with Count Lasalle?"

Morat's hoarse voice replied, "Three batches, Your Majesty. These people had the skills of a military scout. Their mouths were tightly sealed, and they refused to reveal the true identity of their master." He laughed aloud. "But what good does it serve? Only a few places in the country have scouts with this characteristic. Discovering the man behind them was as easy as breathing."

Val sighed and said, "They were my best scouts."

The supreme king said coldly, "But I did not manage to figure out what exactly the agreement between you and Lampard is and how you would come to realize your plan.

"That was until this Eckstedtian mentioned that Eckstedtians prefer heroes from the battlefield. Yes, once war breaks out, the most dazzling person on the battlefield would be the hero. Eckstedt itself was built on that basis.

"Moreover, in the likelihood of a war, who other than the Duke of the Northern Territory could better use the excuse of 'fending for the country' to engage in warfare? If the enemies were actually your collaborator, then it would be very much easier for you to claim your honor and glory from the battlefield.

"When war breaks out, your pledge to defend the Northern Territory will make you a hero who fought against Eckstedt. You will also become the only person who can mediate with them. In the situation where there are no more descendants in the royal family, are you not naturally the best suited to be the next king?"

Val laughed coldly.

Looking at Val with grief, the king continued, "Am I right? Traitor of the Northern Territory, the Guardian Duke of the Northern Territory?"

"Is it really so important for you to be a king? So important that a person with an originally noble and pure personality like yours would betray your land, your people, and your country?"

Suddenly, the hall was immersed in absolute silence.

Even Lasalle felt awkward and kept his silence.

Val Arunde stared at the floor blankly for a long time.

Then he shut his eyes tightly.

"Haha."

As he laughed in a desolate manner, he opened his eyes and spoke calmly, "It was not supposed to be like this."

With a dazed expression on his face, Val slowly continued, "All of this was supposed to go according to my plan."

The king narrowed his eyes.

"New Star is a group that was set up right after the Desert War five years ago by Constellation's suzerains, aiming to fight against your increasingly pretentious power as the king.

"It did not matter whether it was Cullen or Nanchester, all of them came to me, and were all rejected.

"But I reckoned that it was a rare opportunity. I could realize my objective from the confrontation between the both of you.

"That was an unbelievably far away objective."

Val walked towards the center of the hall, eyes set upon a distant spot, and sighed. "Despite the risk, I went to Eckstedt and met Lampard—You should have seen his face when I took off my hood—That night, we formed our alliance.

"I was responsible in provoking Zemunto and Friess, in provoking them to engage in the frequent conflicts at the borders with Eckstedt. For this purpose, I spared no pains in giving up Pine Nut County to Zemunto."

Two of the counts from the Thirteen Distinguished Families of the Northern Territory became livid and frowned. Both looked towards the duke, whom they had fought side by side with over the years.

"In Eckstedt, Lampard began his operation. Making use of the border conflicts, he exaggerated the importance of revising the 'treaty' pertaining to national boundaries and blew it up until it became a great mission. King Nuven was convinced and decided to secretly dispatch his only son for the diplomatic mission so that he could enhance his experience and qualification to be better prepared for the throne. He was old, and old people always wanted to arrange for all things that would happen after their demise.

"I disclosed this information to New Star. Many of the ambitious ones in the group like Nanchester and Covendier were quick to realize that it was a good opportunity to whittle the power of the king. The only thing I did not tell them was that the only son, whom King Nuven secretly sent, was in that diplomatic group. Thinking of it now, they would have been quite intimidated if they found out about this fact. It is too bad. To quote a Far Eastern proverb, 'Once you ride on a tiger, you will not be able to get off.'"

Duke Cullen shook his head, Zayen let out a cold harrumph, while Koshder gritted his

teeth and glared at Val.

"The suzerains were under the impression that they were using Eckstedt's indignation and accusation to whittle away the king's prestige and power. Only Lampard and I knew that they were just beginning to instigate a war between the two countries.

"Lampard was the source of information on Eckstedt providing me with information concerning the diplomatic group's travel route and personnel. I was tasked to buy over the escorts since I had the advantage of having control over the Northern Territory. I was to monitor and guide them to the 'ideal' assassination sites, and the ignorant New Star would finish up the last part of the plot. The three sides unknowingly coordinated together to complete our mission, even the skillful guards beside the prince were not able to escape death.

"Lampard speedily forwarded the news to the 'Secret Room', to Dragon Cloud City, and at the same time, recommended Lasalle Weider to the anguished King Nuven. I rushed nonstop to bring the news to Eternal Star, suggesting military mobilization to exaggerate the seriousness of the matter, so as to make Kessel convene a meeting among the nobles to discuss it. This was to obtain majority support, and the more, the better."

Lasalle looked at Val with a pale face, then turned to Kessel.

No one took notice of him.

"Zayen Covendier, little boy, you should have been dead during yesterday's assassination. The nobles of New Star were not the only ones who knew about your whereabouts. I, the schemer also knew."

Immediately, Zayen's expression changed.

"Yes." Val Arunde nodded his head powerlessly. "The one who tried to kill you was not one of your fellow New Star. It was me.

"Just look at your alliance, all of you started to harbor suspicions towards each other upon learning the news of the attempted assassination. That shows how fragile your alliance actually is."

Several of the dukes and counts narrowed their eyes.

Zayen slammed his palm fiercely on the armrest.

The young Covendier spoke in anger, "So yesterday, when that boy... You stood up for him to sow discord among the suzerains! Because you have planned this all along!"

Val had a disarming smile, and as Zayen still remained livid, he continued speaking, "This way, New Star would soon become scattered as a result of doubt and internal instability. The royal family's pressure will be greatly enhanced, and I too would have one less strong opponent to deal with in the future.

"The original plan of New Star was to force the king to appoint an heir when he most needed their support for war, but in such a chaotic parliament where the members were highly skeptical of each other, this plan would definitely bring about a lot of problems in the future. Meanwhile, my proposal and Kessel's to fight against Eckstedt's invasion would surely fail to get the support of the other suzerains. It would have seemed as if the both of us had been schemed against.

"And in a few hours, Lasalle Weider would barge into Eternal Star with Eckstedt's indignation. He would start to provoke us in a frenzy, and he would propose conditions that Constellation could not accept. There was only one aim—war."

Thales looked at Val in great disbelief.

"If Kessel had chosen war, as per our plan, we would have made sure that he would not have sufficient military power. Then Lampard would easily succeed in the invasion of the Northern Territory, and my tacit agreement with Lampard could easily render Kessel's glorious death in the battlefield, just like what had happened to the late Prince Horace. At the very least, I would be able to let him taste the agony of defeat, where he would disheartened and disgraced.

"On the other hand, if Kessel had chosen conciliation, giving up the Northern Territory would make him a criminal in the Kingdom. I would urge the suzerains and the citizens to abdicate him from his throne, but I would still remain in the Northern Territory and be involved in the battle. When Eckstedt, particularly Lampard, comes to claim the territory, the suzerains and the royal family would cower, and only I would call upon the military and pledge to fight against the attackers to my death. It would make me even more noble, like the only beam of light in the dark."

"Hah! And someone called me a hypocrite before this!" Upon hearing this, the One-

Eyed Dragon glared at Thales.

Arunde folded his arms and put on a pained smile.

"Yes, no matter which choice, we would meet a disastrous defeat in the Northern Territory. But then, in the darkest moment of all, I would suddenly 'defeat' Lampard in a crucial battle, thereby reversing the situation. After that, Lampard and I would appreciate each other's abilities, and once we form an alliance, he would retreat with the territory he claimed, feeling satisfied. I would be a hero worthy of becoming the new king. Compared to Kessel, who has suffered tremendous blame and has no support from the suzerains, I would naturally be the best choice to be the next powerful king."

"Val Arunde!" Count Zemunto shouted angrily, "That is our Northern Territory! The land your ancestors defended and ruled for ages!"

"Stop this nonsense." Count Friess looked at Val with a dark gaze. "Can you not see? He is no longer the 'Iron Eagle' Duke we used to know."

With a desolate look, Val did not even notice the two counts from Northern Territory. He continued with a dazed expression.

"Among the mutual distrust of the suzerains, I should have been the least suspected person, since I remained neutral. Moreover, even if the king still survived by then, I am his closest friend, brother of the Head Ritual Master of Sunset Temple, and the popular hero of Constellation, who will return after fending off an invasion. I am destined to be the next Supreme King of Constellation."

"Whereas, in Eckstedt, without a rightful heir to the throne, the Walton Family would have to withdraw from the King Selection Congress. At the same time, based on Lampard's splendid accomplishments in invading Constellation and the occupation of a large chunk of land in the Northern Territory, he would rapidly rise to power. With Constellation and my support, Lampard would be destined to be the next King of Eckstedt."

With a strange look on his face, Val Arunde gazed at Thales, and an expression that said he was sorry things turned out this way appeared across his eyes. "Everything was supposed to go smoothly without a hitch... Until the sudden appearance of this boy, which messed up the entire plan."

"Zayen is not dead, he is still on your side. The effect of forcing you to name the heir was not good. There was no life and death struggle among the suzerains of New Star as far as the issue of succession was concerned. Instead, they got into a conflict with the royal family in terms of the appointment of the new prince. The diplomat from Eckstedt was caught in your trap by his ignorance of the National Conference and the appointment of a new prince.

"Nevertheless, I will have to go on walking, until..."

Val sighed, smiled in a mocking manner, and shook his head indifferently.

"Just like that, I failed."

At this point, the hall fell into total silence.

Chapter 71

Iron Hand King (One)

"Is that so?"

Having listened to Val's declaration, Kessel's expression turned unusually complicated.

"But why was it you? You were supposed to be a noble person, a pure warrior. You have your beliefs."

"Haha." Val started laughing for no reason. "Why can't it be me?"

Kessel paused and looked sadly at Val's scar which extended from his chest to his chin. "You were once my most trusted friend and brother. We grew up in the capital city together, and were the best partners and the closest of brothers. I was closer to you than to my blood brothers like Midier. We even promised to marry each other's sisters."

"Enough!" Val abruptly raised his head. His eyes were filled with fury. "You are not allowed to mention Liscia and Constance. You do not deserve to."

Thales' heart jolted. The image of Liscia Arunde and Constance Jadestar flashed before his eyes—the lonely figure of the Head Ritual Master and the little stone jar.

The king's expression dimmed. "I knew that you hated me, but I thought it was only because of Liscia, and that as a suzerain, you were still loyal to me and Constellation. I thought that the belief in your heart was still noble and unshakable."

The Duke of the Northern Territory who betrayed the Northern Territory spoke resentfully, "Isn't that so? I hate you indeed, but everything I do is for the sake of Constellation!"

The king narrowed his eyes. "What?"

Val Arunde stepped away from the formation of vassals. His gaze was firm.

"If I succeed just by paying some price and enduring momentary bloodshed, Constellation and the Dragon—the shield and the blade of the Western Peninsula—will turn a new page in history.

"In the era of the Ancient Empire, Arunde was a supreme family that ruled the Northland Province. On the other hand, Lampard was a blood descendant of the Revolutionary King, Quiso Lampard, who revolted against the tyrant. The two families' enmity and antagonism have lasted since over a thousand years ago, and this hatred has taken root in our blood, but if even archenemies like us can reconcile. What else is impossible?"

Thales sighed.

'No, you did not reconcile with each other. This is an exchange of benefits.'

Val took a step forward and looked around at everyone with a rabid expression. "The disagreements and enmity between the two kingdoms will be cast aside thanks to the heroic friendship and loyal cooperation between Lampard and me. The blood descendants of both kingdoms—our children—will enter an engagement. Their son will inherit Constellation and Eckstedt at the same time. The two mighty kingdoms, Constellation and the Dragon, will become one. Think about it. The warm, heroic blood of the Great Dragon of the North, infused into the body of the descendant of the mighty Empire!"

Val continued excitedly, "We might not be able to bring back the glory of the Empire, but we can definitely put an end to the flames of war in the Northern Territory. The flames of war will never reignite, and disasters like the Bloody Year will never happen again! The Northern Territory will always be peaceful!"

"To hell with your peacefulness!" Count Zemunto spat angrily.

Val did not care, he clenched his right fist tightly. "It can even be taken one step further—a newborn power will rise in the Western Peninsula. With the shield in one hand and the blade in another, we will point our swords towards Camus Union, carve up the land of those tradesmen and profit from them. After the power equilibrium between the three strongest forces in the Western Peninsula is destroyed, the others will not pose a problem. Very soon, the Western Peninsula will be reunified."

The Duke of the Northern Territory gritted his teeth and surveyed the nobles and

officials. "Therefore, this is all for the sake of Constellation so that it will not have to endure anymore disasters, for its eventual greatness so that there will forever be peace between Constellation and the Dragon."

Thales furrowed his brows.

Behind them, Baron Lasalle coughed and awkwardly said, "Regarding this, I think—"

Bang!

Kessel the Fifth punched the armrest to his left!

"Shut up, Eckstedtian. I will get even with you later." The supreme king's voice was loud. He spoke in a tone that allowed no arguments, "We are now discussing the internal affairs of Constellation."

Lasalle was at a loss for words for a moment.

The king slowly rose and looked down at Val from where he stood.

"For the sake of Constellation?" Kessel the Fifth's eyes turned bloodshot, a sight rarely seen on him. His face was filled with fury. "Betraying your own king and vassals, the Northern Territory, and its people, is this for the sake of Constellation? To not mind inciting a casualty-ridden war so that you can take the throne, is this for the sake of Constellation too?"

Val Arunde clenched his fists tightly and turned towards the king. "Kessel Jadestar, do you think that you are nobler than me?" Val trembled, as if he was trying hard to hold back his emotions. "You... someone from the Jadestar Family are not qualified to point fingers at me!"

The next moment, without regards for manners, he roared, "Your family, the Jadestar Royal Family, is the greatest source of disaster in this kingdom! You are the ones who brought about hell—the disaster from twelve years ago! Until now, we are still atoning for the mistakes you have made!"

Thales could not help but clench his fists tightly. On the other hand, all the people in the hall turned simultaneously towards the king. Many of them had strange expressions on their faces.

The king shut his eyes tightly. "The Bloody Year?"

"The Bloody Year? Yes! THE Bloody Year!" Val laughed miserably. He raised his hands and clenched his fists.

The puzzlement in Thales' heart grew. He looked towards Gilbert. 'What hidden, yet extremely important secret, does the Bloody Year actually harbor?'

Val spoke resentfully, "After that disaster ended, everybody only remembered that the Jadestar Royal Family was almost completely massacred. They only remembered that the Tabark Family only had an orphan girl left! Who would remember the contributions and sacrifices of the Northern Territory?"

The fifteen-year-old Duchess Lyanna inhaled deeply and shut her eyes.

"Who would remember all the blood, dead bodies, widows, and orphans left behind when Eckstedt's army plowed through our land? Who would remember that after the Bloody Year ended, when the entire kingdom was joyfully celebrating the 'Fortress Treaty', almost three quarters of the men, and half the women in the Northern Territory were dead! The remaining elderly and children had to look for food outside in the cold winter or else they would have starved to death at home! And those who went out to look for food, half of them froze to death in the wilderness!

"After I was crowned with the title of the Guardian Duke of the Northern Territory, the first thing I did wasn't to find them food, but to rebury those who starved or froze to death. Otherwise, their corpses would be dug out and eaten by the famished people who were so hungry they couldn't even walk!

"Have you seen such a scene, young master of the capital city?! Who would remember that my father's head was hung on the gate of Cold Castle for a whole month because he refused to surrender after Cold Castle was breached? When I took him down... And I have to see that damned gate every day when I walk in and out of my own castle!

"The Sword of Reversing Light, Prince Horace, entered Eckstedt's tight encirclement heroically and unyieldingly. He fought to death instead of retreating, was wounded eleven times and bravely sacrificed his life... how glorious is that?! However, who would remember that my brothers, the sons of Arunde, stayed close by his side and protected him till their deaths?! Rohan, Kohl, and Nolanur.

"The dead body of the Prince of Constellation was solemnly carried back to the capital

city. But beside him, my brothers were chopped alive into minced meat by Eckstedt's executioner! After everything ended, to bury them, I could only scoop up that thick pile of minced meat, mixed in soil and blood! Who would remember them?!

"My sister and wife's carriage went missing in the wilderness that became chaotic from the raging war. There was no more news about them these past twelve years. I had countless nightmares about them... God knows what they went through!

"And you still dare to say that I only have a daughter as an heiress? Why do you think that I sent my seven-year-old daughter to the Tower of Eradication? To train her to become an heiress? Bullshit! I sent my daughter to the Tower of Eradication because I'm afraid that when I'm not around, the famished people, with eyes red with hunger, would climb into the ruins of Cold Castle and eat Miranda alive!"

Kessel shut his eyes tightly. Recalling that time, many people in the hall could not help but lower their heads.

Val spoke, trembling, "After going through the hell of the Desert War five years ago, Kessel Jadestar, how dare you complain about our weak military strength?! How dare you complain that we don't even have enough cavalry units to form five vanguard teams?!

"Do you think you are the person that I hate? Do you think that I hate you for not marrying my sister? Hate you for letting her down, causing her to become a priestess who will remain unmarried all her life?

"No! What I hate is the Jadestar Family! Your damned family!"

"All of you are at fault for those disasters! Your delusional, idiotic father, your uncle who thinks that he is funny by being rude, your pessimistic eldest brother, those arrogant, useless brothers of yours, and you, the supreme king, born with the blood of those tyrants from the Empire!

"It is the Jadestar Family, who always mingled with the calamities that brought upon the Bloody Year in Constellation, who brought upon such hell!"

'Calamities? Mingled with... the calamities?'

Terrified, Thales subconsciously looked at Gilbert who stood beside him. However, the latter only pursed his lips and did not say anything.

"Do you think that you are some sort of tragic king? The only person left in the Jadestar Royal Family? No!" Val roared madly, "The only things that you have ever cared about are yourself, your will, and your world! Why do you think you are where you are today? You all only have yourselves to blame for the things that happened to you during the Bloody Year!

"You are just like your damned father. Both of you knew where your choices would lead, but you both never gave a damn! You never tried to understand your own vassals, show concern for your own subjects nor care about the people beside you, Iron Hand King! When they call you this, do you not feel mocked? You don't rule with an iron hand, you are just cold-blooded!"

Val's emotions had reached a boiling point and he roared in sadness and despair.

"Why didn't Charleton and the Shadow Shield kill all of you in one go? If it were not for you all bringing back that monster—"

The king abruptly opened his eyes and cut him off with a shout.

"Enough!" Kessel was agitated. He furiously rebuked Arunde, "Val! You are still as foolish, stupid, extreme, and as stubborn as you used to be!"

Kessel glared fixedly at Val. His gaze was inexplicably complicated. "You only believe in what you want to believe in. You are like a foolish piece of wood, ridiculously ignorant."

Breathing heavily, Val stared blankly at the king.

The king sat down dejectedly and tiredly said, "Guards, send Duke Arunde to the dungeons."

Chapter 72

Iron Hand King (Two)

Two members of the Royal Guards clad in Eternally New Armor wordlessly went to stand beside Val.

Duke Cullen shook his head in resignation. "No mercy between friends, a falling out between brothers. Is there anything sadder than this?"

No one answered him.

After a moment, Val Arunde smiled calmly and raised his head. "At least I did one thing." He looked towards Baron Lasalle, who had a strange expression on his face. "I brought about war, didn't I?"

"Lampard and I planned everything, but aren't these dissatisfied nobles of Constellation the ones who took action and killed the prince?"

In an instant, the expressions of Zayen, Koshder and some other counts became strange. Duke Cullen was the only one who was still shaking his head and sighing, as though he was still immersed in the falling out between brothers, which had just happened moments ago.

Val spoke mournfully, "Haha... Kel, Constellation hasn't recovered from the blow yet, and is no match to Eckstedt at all. What are you going to do?"

The king said coldly, "Stay here and watch then. Compare my actions with your own cowardice and watch how I, the cold-blooded Iron Hand King, will face the wrath of the Great Dragon."

Val laughed loudly in grief. "What? Are you going to enlist children below twelve into the army again?"

The king no longer paid him any mind. Instead, he turned towards Eckstedt's emergency envoy.

"Baron Lasalle, I have already fulfilled at least the third condition from among all the conditions you have just stated. Unfortunately, I am unable to hand you the Guardian Duke of the Northern Territory, nor the Archduke of Black Sand. Since there were people from your kingdom involved, it seems unreasonable to still ask us for compensation using our territories or resources."

Lasalle replied with a solemn expression, "Impossible! Just now, I only saw the members of the Royal Court of Constellation argue among themselves. There is no proof that states that the Archduke of Black Sand was involved!

"Eckstedt insists on the conditions for compensation stated earlier. The exact amount can be negotiated, but it cannot be remitted." He raised his head. "Otherwise, let us meet on the battlefield and let our swords and knives do the talking!"

The nobles in the hall began whispering among themselves. Val, who was guarded by the Royal Guards from both sides, even started to laugh scornfully.

"Besides, King Nuven's fury and despair of losing his only heir is not something that can be made even by just finding the culprit!" Lasalle added with a gloomy expression. The king sighed.

"True," Kessel the Fifth spoke drearily, "I felt it."

Lasalle raised his brows.

"I could feel his fury and despair," the king said gloomily, "This is indeed unjust for King Nuven.

"The assassination of the diplomat group and the misfortune of the prince... No matter who did this, they not only insulted Eckstedt, but also Constellation! The shame felt by Constellation from this incident is a hundred- even a thousand times more than the former!"

Many pairs of eyes looked towards Val at the same time. The king raised his head, and his gaze was icy cold.

"Constellation has never thought of evading responsibility. Since it is unjust, we will definitely pay what is due."

The two Counts of the Northern Territory immediately became nervous.

'Is the king really going to sacrifice the Northern Territory?'

'I mean, you know, Duke Arunde... '

Zemunto stole a glance at Val. The latter smiled indifferently.

Baron Lasalle smiled. "Your Majesty, you are indeed an honorable and brave person. Whether it is Pine Nut County, Bear County, or even the peripheral area of Cold Castle, as long as our side is satisfied, the exact land, and even the surface area, are actually negotiable—"

"Your people will definitely be satisfied," the king said coldly.

Under the watchful eyes of the crowd, the Supreme King of Constellation grabbed the scepter beside his hand, rose from his throne once more, and slowly walked down the steps.

Kessel the Fifth took heavy steps towards the bewildered Lasalle. "Go and reply to King Nuven and your master at Black Sand Region. Constellation is deeply apologetic and feels great guilt about the assassination of the diplomat group."

Lasalle flashed a smile and nodded slightly. "I will relay your words. As for the compensation... we will need a map to measure the territories—"

"No."

Lasalle was stunned.

The supreme king continued. "Constellation does not have any territories that can be used as compensation to Eckstedt. We are unable to make up for King Nuven's grief and loss either..."

Lasalle's expression changed.

Thales' breathing quickened. 'Is he going to go, "THIS! IS! SPARTA!"?'

"...However, Constellation will not evade its responsibilities," the king said softly. In the next moment, the prince had goosebumps all over his body!

The thirty-ninth Supreme King of Constellation, Kessel Jadestar, slowly raised his

scepter—which shone with an unearthly starlight—and pointed it at Thales!

"You have not met him yet, correct?" Kessel the Fifth said slowly, "This is Thales Jadestar, the Second Prince of Constellation, my son, and my only heir."

Everyone looked at Thales.

"I will send him to Dragon Clouds City to apologize to King Nuven and Eckstedt."

Thales was stunned. Lasalle was also stunned.

The king did not look at Thales anymore, but continued speaking coldly, "If this is not enough, if the pain of losing a son cannot be eased with an apology...

"King Nuven wants justice, correct? I will give him justice. Tell King Nuven that he can kill my son, kill the only heir of Constellation to avenge his only son and heir who died in Constellation!

"Let him fill the void with blood and wash off the hatred with murder! Take my son's life in exchange for his son's life! Take the blood of Constellation to make up for the blood of Eckstedt!"

'What...?'

Thales stood where he was, stunned. He understood what the king said... But he also did not understand it.

'What?'

At that moment, everybody in the hall, be they nobles, suzerains, officials, guards, servants, or even the Duke of the Northern Territory, opened their mouths wide in shock!

"Your Ma—" Gilbert's face was pale. He wanted to object immediately, but somebody was faster than him.

"Your Majesty!"

For the first time in history, Duke Cullen's expression was solemn. He spoke loudly with an anxious expression, "Do you know what you are saying?"

Thales was trembling, and his ears rang, he could not even feel his own breathing.

Kessel replied coldly, "Quiet, Bob. Your king has already made his decision."

Cullen stared at the supreme king in shock, unable to say anything. Even Fakenhaz could not laugh anymore.

Behind him, Zayen watched Thales with a complicated expression. On the other hand, the One-Eyed Dragon lowered his head in contemplation.

At that moment, the Nine-Pointed Star Royal Crown on Kessel's head glistened. Like an emotionless God, he spoke slowly to Lasalle, who was already in total shock.

"On a personal level, we should be able to quench a father's fury and ease his despair if we exchange a father's only son with another father's only son.

"On an official level, exchanging the life of the heir to the King of Constellation for the heir to the Archduke of Dragon Clouds City is fair, is it not?"

The king stepped onto the floor beneath the stairs. His stately and authoritative voice boomed like thunder. "After being tainted by the blood of each other's only heirs, Constellation will not owe anything to Eckstedt anymore!

"This is fair enough, is it not? At that time, we will not be able to turn back anymore! We will forgo all qualms and burdens, then engage in an all-out war with the determination to completely annihilate the other party!

"This is fair, no?"

Different emotions shone in Lasalle's eyes. He was so stunned by the king's sudden, shocking words that his eyes opened wide and his mouth hung open. He raised the scroll in his right hand, and his mouth trembled. He wanted to say something, but was at a loss for words.

'It is one matter to draw on a horrible, foreign affairs incident and strive for the gains of Eckstedt (and perhaps Archduke Lampard too) to such an extreme extent. However...

'To sacrifice their only heir... Constellation does not run a king selection system like Eckstedt does. If the prince who will inherit the throne is killed, it will be a blood feud

that spans for generations-for tens of generations. This will forever turn the two kingdoms into irreconcilable arch enemies, and they would not stop fighting until the other is destroyed. It will bring war that destroys kingdoms—this is another matter entirely!’

Under King Kessel's authoritative and aggressive gaze, Lasalle was drenched in cold sweat. His brows moved about, as if they reflected the intense conflict in his mind.

"This... this... with my status, I am unable to reply to this matter right now..." he replied with a stutter.

Kessel yelled furiously, "Then go and ask your king!"

Lasalle was so scared that he took a step backwards.

The supreme king did not even glance at Thales. He continued speaking in a dark tone, "Tell him that I have already dispatched Baron Arracca Murkh, along with two thousand regular soldiers of the royal family, to Broken Dragon Fortress!"

"Prince Thales will set out soon afterwards and go before King Nuven. The prince will be at his mercy! This is the price Constellation can pay!"

The people in the entire hall did not even dare to breath.

The king glanced at Lasalle, who was no longer frowning and who was at a loss for what to do. "As for Archduke Lampard from Black Sand Region... I know that he has already dispatched a large army and is preparing to invade the Northern Territory at any time. Will he make way and escort my son to Dragon Clouds City to apologize, or will he wage war on Baron Murkh at all costs? I look forward to seeing what he would choose!"

Lasalle staggered backwards in dejection. He gasped for breath like a drowning man.

"Your Majesty!"

The one who spoke up was the fifteen-year-old Duchess Lyanna. The elegant young woman's face was pale. "He-His Highness is your only-only heir. If something bad happens to him on the way... your throne..."

"Ha!" The supreme king let out a bark of laughter out of anger. "That is far too simple

a problem!"

Thales' whole body trembled as he looked at everything happening in front of him. Kessel the Fifth turned and faced the suzerains in the hall, "No matter what happens to the second prince, if he so happens to die and the royal bloodline's existence is completely wiped out...

"The person who totally destroys Constellation's enemy, who successfully avenges the last Jadestar prince, who takes revenge for the absolutely humiliated Constellation..."

The king abruptly turned and raised his scepter up high.

"Will be the next Supreme King of Constellation!

"If Constellation does not even have a person like this..."

Kessel coldly swept his gaze over the nobles in the hall. He spat out his words, and they were as sharp as knives, "Is there any meaning left to its existence?!"

The whole hall was silent.

Kessel coldly concluded, "The meeting is over. I await King Nuven's reply."

Then—

"Kel."

Duke Val Arunde, whose face was ghastly pale, struggled to speak. He stared at Kessel and at Thales in disbelief. "What... what sort of crazy thing are you about to do again?"

Kessel the Fifth sneered. "Crazy?"

The king snorted coldly, and repeated Val's words from before in a mocking tone, "Everything I do is for the sake of Constellation."

Two guards walked forward and took the stunned duke away. The sweat-drenched Lasalle left. The suzerains whispered among themselves and looked at the king and his heir.

Gilbert clenched his fists tightly and stared at the king, who donned an astral blue

cape. The king left in large strides and did not spare a glance at anyone.

Thales was absent-minded and still, not moving except breathing. He was unaware of the stares from the entire hall trained on him.

Chapter 73

Powerless

Lower City District, Underground Market, Sunset Pub.

"You should have gone to take a look two days ago. There were hordes of people, especially when the second prince appeared. That cheer... I could not help but cheer along- Hey, brat! Watch where you're going!"

A ten-year-old boy who carried a sack full of potatoes squeezed past the plump and fierce Edmund with an agonized look. Edmund snorted, turned his head back and continued fiddling with the food on the plate.

"Hehe, you didn't know about this, right? The new prince is called Thales. The exact same name as that black-haired little scoundrel who always came to ask for free stuff... Brat, why are you looking here? What does the prince have to do with you? Continue with your work!"

"I heard that Kessel—that playboy—wants to ask for peace from Eckstedt with the prince's life as an exchange. People were talking about this everywhere in the market today. Everyone was righteously indignant, saying that all the suzerains in Constellation are worthless wretches that are unable to protect the kingdom, and that the royal family had sacrificed too much for Constellation... B*llshit, are we talking about that Jadestar Royal Family that only produces lunatics? You don't know this, but twelve years ago, I was in front of the palace door..."

In front of Edmund, a young woman wearing tight long pants and a vest played with her short, brown hair in boredom. She leaned over the food delivery window between the counter and the scullery, looking as if she had given up on life.

This brunette was lithe and had a valiant bearing. At that moment, she spoke through gritted teeth as her face twitched, "I'm asking you, are you going to give me that plate of steak before you poke them until they're shredded to pieces?!"

Edmund raised his head. His expression was filled with fury. He glared indignantly at the bartender of Sunset Pub, Jala Charleton, and angrily pushed the steak in his hand

into her hands.

Jala turned and passed the plate to a timid little girl with a scar on her face beyond the counter.

Behind her, Edmund snorted. "What is this attitude?! Your uncle only wanted to have a little chat with you... And to give you some guidance so that you can forget that blond cop who is very obviously a heartbreaker..."

Jala angrily rolled her eyes. Her delicate face became as sour as rotten milk. She turned her head and snapped, "Damned fatty! If you use this to stir up an argument again- I will talk about your dream-lover..."

"Hey, hey, hey!" The plump cook Edmund's expression immediately changed greatly. He raised his plump hands and tapped the food delivery window a few times.

"Are you going to turn hostile because of a slight disagreement? I was just showing concern for my adorable niece's love life. It is the most important thing for two people to have a common language. If a bartender from a gang mingles with a police officer..."

Jala could not take it anymore and angrily punched the bar counter!

"Everybody, listen up!" Jala said gruffly and loudly, drawing the stares of all the customers, "My still single, forty-one-year-old uncle, the cook of Sunset Pub, Edmund Skorch, has a woman he loves the most in his life. She is—"

At that moment, like a frightened pet cat, Edmund sucked in a sharp breath!

Before Jala could reveal the name, the plump cook roared furiously with the most energy he had ever used in his life, "Stop—!"

Jala shut her mouth and glared disdainfully at him. She scornfully continued, "You are going to be forever alone, scaredy-cat! Person with an unrequited love!"

Edmund stared dejectedly at his niece and spoke in an embarrassed manner, "Erm... we are out of potatoes. I'll go and restock..."

Sinti, who was coming in with another bag of potatoes, watched with a bewildered expression as Edmund escaped from the scullery.

'We are out of... potatoes? Then what am I carrying...?'

At the moment, a boy whose right hand was wrapped in strips of cloth staggered in with a frightened expression.

"Th-They-They're here!"

Ryan's face was glum. With haste, he dashed behind the bar counter. There was a bruise on his head. The stunned Sinti hugged the poor child. Jala's face sank. She put down the rag in her hand. Coria—who had just finished delivering food—raised her head and looked at the main door. She could not help but start to tremble.

She watched with a pale face as more than ten malicious and powerful-looking figures in black rudely pushed aside the customers who blocked their way, then slowly walked into the pub.

The noisy pub immediately fell silent.

"Go to the scullery."

Jala moved her hand to her thigh and calmly alerted the three child beggars, but two of the thugs walked forward with hostile expressions and forcefully blocked the door between the bar counter and the scullery.

The three child beggars cowered and hid beside Jala again.

Jala asked furiously, "What is the meaning of this?! This is 'Sunset Pub', not Black Street! Even Morris does not dare to behave atrociously here."

However, the group of thugs were not swayed at all. Instead, with calm expressions, they walked to every corner of the pub as if they were on sentry duty.

A brawny-looking thug—obviously a tough one to deal with—took out a single bit axe from behind him.

Under the indignant and terrified gazes of a few customers, he swung the axe with one hand and with a cold expression, then... chopped down a bar table.

Thud!

The huge force smashed the table in two, and the pieces flew outwards!

Amid the panic, many of the customers hugged their heads to shield themselves from the flying pieces.

The brawny man with the axe coldly turned his head and shouted loudly to the other people in the pub, "The Brotherhood is handling some affairs here. F*ck off."

The customers in the pub recognized the identity of these people, and who they worked for—Aoschok the Thunder Axe, one of the Brotherhood's Thirteen Generals.

They were the group of people who were responsible for the trans-border smuggling of weapons, and were an incredibly difficult bunch to handle.

Footsteps rang in the air. Many of the people did not even hesitate before getting up and escaping from the pub.

Suddenly—

A streak of silver lightning flew towards Aoschok at a rapid speed! It was a throwing knife with its blade curved at a strange angle—the famous Wolf Limb Blade from Sunset Pub!

Aoschok's expression changed. He flung his axe outwards and knocked away the throwing knife just in time.

Ting!

Aoschok's whole body trembled!

He realized in shock that the throwing knife carried a strange surge of energy, and as the blade shook, the energy was transmitted to his hand. Because of that, he could not help but freeze.

Gritting his teeth, Aoschok fought against the shock. 'What on earth is this?'

The graceful figure moving faster than him had already grabbed onto another knife. The knife flew rapidly towards him from the bar counter.

'Assassination Blade! It's coming straight to my throat!'

Aoschok was still frozen. His pupils shrank. He was already unable to avoid it.

However, the anticipated splattering of blood did not come.

Jala gritted her teeth and stared ahead in disbelief. Her knife, which should have plunged into Aoschok's throat, was gripped tightly by a hand that was wearing an iron glove.

The owner of the iron glove was a middle-aged man whose face was full of scars.

He stood beside Jala. As simple as that, during such a crucial moment, he seized the Charleton Family's Assassination Blade!

The scar-faced middle-aged man said coldly, "I still remember that as a Charleton who abandoned her family occupation, you were only a useless person of the ordinary class. If it weren't for 'Reversed Machete', you wouldn't even have the chance to become a bartender here. The Brotherhood does not take in useless people."

The middle-aged man let go of the blade in his hand and snorted softly, "However, from the strange shock your knife delivered, you have unexpectedly become a supra class elite. Looks like the massacre and battle in Red Street Market made you improve. As expected, people from the Charleton Family can only improve their skills in bloody situations."

Face filled with fury, Jala took a step back. She gritted her teeth and stared at the formidable enemy before her.

'Damn it.'

After the incident at Red Street Market, she had undoubtedly improved a lot.

She reached supra class and also mastered 'Eerie Shock', but why was this man able to seize her Assassination Blade?

The few remaining customers whispered among themselves and left dejectedly. One of them looked bewildered. He wanted to speak out, but was immediately pulled away by a person beside him who knew everything about what was going on.

They recognized the middle-aged man whose face was full of scars. He was the head in the weapons smuggling scene, and was only second to Cenza the 'Crownless Fist'

among the Brotherhood's Six Powerhouses.

'The 'Iron Heart', Shanda Roda. He is also Quide Roda's father.' Jala gritted her teeth in silence.

Without hesitation, all the customers ran off. Not a single one remained.

"You don't have to wonder why I'm able to catch your knife. There are never any certainties when it comes to battles. The alleged classification of ordinary class, supra class and so on, is just a way of categorizing things."

Roda, who looked vile and sinister due to the scars, sneered softly. He did not even look at Jala.

Aoschok glared indignantly at Jala and returned the axe to his back. He pulled out a chair for Roda.

"Due to various reasons, there are instances where one party totally dominates the battle between two people of the same class. There are also instances where two people of different classes are equally matched in a battle. All of this is very normal."

Roda casually sat on the chair and folded his arms. He looked towards the female bartender, who seemed like she was facing a formidable enemy.

"When I was young, I even saw a swordsman of only supra class engage in a battle where there was a huge gap in skill between him and his opponent, and he had almost no possibility of victory. That supra class swordsman...

"Slaughtered two supreme class elites."

'What?' Jala's pupils contracted.

Looking at the astonished Jala, Roda laughed. "That was the battle that made the person I respect the most famous. Facing such a tight encirclement and such enemies, I thought I would die there... until he raised his sword. Ever since then, I did not believe in any absolute classification of abilities. Even supreme class elites can be slaughtered like pigs..."

Roda leaned his body forward. Then a contemplative and serious expression appeared on his scarred face. "So why would it be impossible for my good-for-nothing son to be

killed by a few child beggars?"

Jala furrowed her brows as shock appeared on her face. She stared at Roda. 'He... As expected, he is here to... '

The three children behind her cowered even more. Without realizing it, Jala took a step sideways and shielded the three children. She raised the knife in her hand.

"Now then, are you sure that you still want to use the knife on me, little girl?"

Roda exhaled and laughed in satisfaction.

Through the corner of her eyes, the female bartender swept her gaze past Aoschok and the burly men around her, who were more than ten in number. She knew that this was the elite squad that was responsible for the smuggling of weapons in the Brotherhood.

She was no match for them.

Jala gritted her teeth and thrust the Wolf Limb Blade in her right hand into the table beside her.

'Damn it. What should I do?'

"So this is the prototype of the Reversed Machete's weapon?"

The scar-faced middle-aged man looked at the strange curvature of the Wolf Limb Blade. He gently stroked the four rings on his left hand with his iron glove-clad right hand and slowly said, "The legendary Assassin of the Brotherhood changed his weapon because of the creativity of a little girl like you. He even had a change of nicknames in a short few years. This is very rare indeed."

"I call it the 'Wolf Limb Blade'," Jala said coldly, looking as if she wanted them to leave.

Roda laughed softly, "Why does it matter? There's no use in having a flashy weapon name. The key lies in the person using it. In your hands, this knife can only be used to cut flesh. On the other hand, in the hands of the 'Reversed Machete', it can be used to break through layers upon layers of defenses and slaughter the former Duke of Tricolor Iris Flowers of Constellation."

Jala furrowed her brows tightly and glared at the scar-faced middle-aged man in front of her.

"Get straight to the point," Jala said coldly, "The old man doesn't like people disrupting business."

Shanda Roda—the terrifying existence within the Six Powerhouses of the Brotherhood—laughed loudly, "Do you think that you can scare me with the 'Reversed Machete'?"

Jala did not answer, but a cold chill ran down her spine. The other party came prepared.

"You know, I usually don't really bother about my own son. A b*tch gave birth to him. I don't even know if he's mine. Besides, he's a good-for-nothing." Roda snorted softly. "So, I don't really care if he's alive, either."

Roda raised his head and exercised the joints in his neck. "But since he took on my family name, and even works in the Brotherhood... I cannot tolerate the fact that someone is challenging my authority with my son's life."

Roda's words were ruthless.

"I also cannot tolerate the fact that a person who owes a debt of blood to the Roda family has not received due punishment."

Jala furrowed her brows. She looked around once more. 'What should I do? When will Edmund come back? Where is the old man?'

"I only learned—after killing more than ten child beggars—that the four child beggars who could not be found all this while, and whom are the greatest suspects in the murder of my son, might be hiding in Sunset Pub."

Roda's gaze shot towards the three children.

Coria was so scared that she immediately burst into tears.

Jala gritted her teeth. Recalling Thales' words, she took a step forward and shouted loudly, "The three of them have nothing to do with your son's death! There is a missing boy. He is the culprit who killed Quide!"

Roda laughed loudly. The scars on his face twitched. "I know- This brat with a severed hand said that too. Thales, right? He has the same name as the new prince... Now, the problem is, where is he?"

Jala exhaled deeply and forced herself to forget that night in Red Street Market. "You shouldn't ask me that."

Roda narrowed his eyes. "Then, why are you providing such great protection to these three child beggars who escaped? Does Sunset Pub really need three child beggars who don't even have the energy to carry plates to operate?"

"This is my business," Jala said as she pursed her lips.

Surprisingly, Roda raised his brows and nodded. "True."

Amid Jala's puzzlement, Shanda Roda nonchalantly leaned backwards and waved at his followers.

"So, I suppose that you wouldn't mind... handing over these brats who escaped to me?"

Before Jala could react, Roda's followers went forward without hesitation.

Amid the three children's wails and kicks, the thugs coldly separated them from her and violently hoisted them onto their shoulders.

"Big sister Jala—" Coria cried. One of the thugs covered her mouth with his hand.

Sinti's arms were locked behind his back. He grunted from the intense pain.

Ryan just shivered as the thugs subdued him.

Jala's eyes widened in fury. "You—"

The raging female bartender abruptly pulled out the knife from the table!

As she moved, she firmly executed the Swift Killing Blade—which had made the bald Sven surrender and ask for mercy when they were in Red Street Market.

She aimed for Roda!

But her knife was unable to move more than one foot. Without moving, Roda's powerful arm shot out arm, and the iron glove-clad hand firmly seized her knife again!

Like a mamba snake who had its vital point seized, Jala's agile figure immediately froze.

Jala stared in shock at the calm looking Roda. She only felt as though there was a huge stone weighing ten thousand kilograms hanging from the knife in her hand. She had to grip onto it with all her might to keep it from slipping away from her hand. At that moment, the female bartender's expression turned extremely unpleasant.

'Impossible, the Swift Killing Blade, which excels in speed, subtlety, and nimbleness, is also... '

Roda said flatly, "Don't force my hand, little girl. We are both in supra class, but when it comes to combat, I have a hundred methods that I can use to defeat you effortlessly."

Jala watched in disbelief as the Wolf Limb Blade in her hand was bent by Roda, just like that!

He loosened his grip and let go of the deformed Wolf Limb Blade. However, the blade of an axe was then placed right in front of Jala's throat.

Aoschok's gaze was filled with fighting spirit. "This time, you don't stand a chance."

Jala bit her lip. Looking at the enemies around her, who showed the faint intention to surround and attack her, she furiously said, "This is Sunset Pub! You all are challenging the old man's authority!"

Roda stood up coldly. There was fury and hatred in his eyes.

"Listen up, little girl. I respect your family name and the owner of this pub, that is why I did not harm you at all. I have already displayed the highest level of friendship and kindness possible to you, along with respect towards the 'Reversed Machete'."

Jala indignantly raised her head. "But you can't—"

Roda roared and cut her off, "Enough with the nonsense!"

Jala was stunned for a moment.

The savage looking Roda went before her and stared her down from above. "Do you think I do not know that you have something to do with my son's death? A good few hundred people saw him come to your pub and had a hand maimed by you."

'He knew?' Under the intense tension, Jala's breathing quickened.

"I don't give a damn about how he fell into another person's trap. I am not concerned as to who killed him either, whether his name is Thales or Tyler." Roda exhaled, grinned hideously, and continued, "I only plan to get rid of all the people related to his death... Let the others see Rodas' tactics. This should be enough."

The three children were still struggling and kicking. However, their strength was gradually draining from their bodies.

Roda's scar-filled face twitched. He grimly said, "So you can see that I am already very lenient with you, little girl. You should go and take a look at Nayer Rick!

"Lance spoke about all the good things he could do for him."

Jala's heart jolted. 'Rick?'

Roda straightened his clothes and flashed a hideous grin. "So, on behalf of my old friend, I only dug out one of his eyes, and destroyed one of his hands."

Roda's voice then became indifferent once again. "Don't worry. I'm not a murderous maniac, nor am I a sadist. It's just that I have to retain some of my authority."

Jala lowered her head. Her heart was filled with anguish. 'What should I do? I can't think of anything I can do at all. Clever brat, if you were here... what would you do?'

"Continue with your business, then. I will compensate for the losses here."

Roda indifferently turned and strode across the messy floor of the pub. He walked out the main door.

"Send my regards to the 'Reversed Machete'."

Looking at the tables and chairs that were scattered all over the floor, Aoschok nonchalantly threw down a bag of coins.

The Thunder Axe said with a cold expression, "You are truly amazing, but I will definitely become stronger than you."

The group left. Jala stared at their retreating figures in a trance. The only thing left in the air were the wails of the three children as they struggled.

Jala clenched her fists tightly and stared at the Wolf Limb Blade in her hand. Her expression showed that she was struggling. Her hand, which held the knife, began trembling.

The children's voices slowly became further away, softer, and finally faded away.

Jala lowered her head.

Cling-clang!

The Wolf Limb Blade dropped onto the floor powerlessly.

The knees of Sunset Pub's female bartender buckled under her. Just like that, she dropped to her knees amid the mess on the floor.

The bartender trembled and spoke helplessly to herself, "Jala Charleton, you are so pathetic."

Jala shut her eyes tight. She gritted her teeth so tightly that her teeth almost shattered from the force.

A few tears slid down her cheeks.

'Sorry... Sorry, brat.'

The tears dripped down onto the floor.

'I couldn't... Couldn't... Protect them well... '

Chapter 74

Homicidal Maniac

Mindis Hall.

Snow was falling from the sky onto the training field, where a small figure could be seen holding onto a heavy, thick wooden sword and shield. With his alternating footsteps and defensive moves, he parried the royal guard's wooden sword.

Thales huffed and puffed as he straightened his back once more, leaning his weight against the wooden sword. He then yelled, "Again!"

His practice partner, Chora, the head of Mindis Hall's Jadestar Private Army, stared at him with a troubled look.

"How long has His Highness been behaving like this?" At the side of the training field was Count Gilbert Caso, and he looked worried as he asked a Jadestar private soldier standing beside him.

The guard replied worriedly too, "The training has been going on continuously for three hours since this morning until now, sir. As for last night, the light in His Highness' study room was on for the entire night... Sir Chora even made us stay up all night to guard the entrance to his room, so that we could rush in immediately should anything happen inside."

Gilbert sighed.

After that unusual meeting with the diplomats the day before, the second prince had returned to the Mindis Hall immediately.

Gilbert, on the other hand, received the most urgent command from His Majesty—to thoroughly prepare for the prince's diplomatic mission to the north.

A healthy and strong messenger crow would not take up more than a few days to travel between Eternal Star City and Dragon Clouds City... They could depart at any time.

For the entirety of the previous day, he busied himself along with many officials as well as nobles and suzerains of different classes on various matters; from His Highness' attendants and the schedule for his trip, to the wording on his letter of credentials. It was only until now that he finally had time to take a look at Mindis Hall.

However, what Gilbert was really worried about was Thales' mental condition. After all, not every child could face such a situation peacefully where his father decided to use him as a bargaining chip and send him to appease a war.

Currently, His Highness was probably upset over His Majesty's seemingly heartless decision...

Gilbert lifted his head up and to his surprise, he saw that Thales was panting and gesturing with his hand before tossing away the sword in his grasp.

"I am going to rest for a while and have lunch. I have been training for such a long time, why did you not remind me of it?" Thales waved his hands and asked tiredly.

Chora, who looked as if a great weight was lifted off his shoulders, immediately nodded in agreement whereas Thales started to unbuckle the shield on his arm.

Gilbert swiftly walked towards him, then the former Foreign Affairs Minister spoke cautiously to Thales.

"Your Highness... pardon me for being straightforward. Your old wounds are not fully recovered yet, so you should not exhaust your body in this manner."

"Gilbert, you do not have to worry about this. Look, my wounds are almost healed." Thales skillfully and swiftly took off the shield as he exercised his left arm. He bared his teeth and said, "In a mere three days... Maybe, I really am some sort of monster."

Gilbert was left speechless before he replied with a solemn expression, "Your Highness, please do not think of such nonsense—"

"Alright, alright... it is my own body after all. And I have already been living in this world for a few years..." Thales cut him off and laughed in a contemptuous manner. "Do you really think that I am not aware of the real reason?"

"This peculiar physique I have is mostly due to my mother, who is even more mysterious than a Mystic, am I right?"

Thales laughed as he carefully observed Gilbert's expression.

He was hoping to see and understand something from Gilbert's reaction.

Yes.

Not long after he arrived in Mindis Hall, Thales had been skeptical ever since he saw the king's odd attitude whenever he spoke of his mother.

From his queer and mysterious mystic energy, to his strange cognitive abilities; from the flashbacks that appear without reason, to his ability to recover, which seemed inhuman...

There was something else that was the most questionable... Ever since he was found and retrieved by the Jadestar Royal Family, he could not seem to hide his abnormality as a 'transmigrator' even if he tried to. Even Thales was fully aware that his style of conversation, knowledge and experiences, reactions, and even his learning ability to become well-versed with the letters here within a short month were very uncommon.

However, other than the initial surprise, both Gilbert and his father in name had very few reactions to it, as if this was the way he was supposed to be.

It was as if Thales was born to be exactly like this.

The first and the last points, along with Liscia's and the king's attitudes especially made him almost a hundred percent certain that the traits he exhibited were indeed related to his mother, who he had yet to meet.

TherrenGirana, whom the king and God's spokesperson feared to the point where they were not even willing to mention her... who exactly was she?

Of course, Thales already formed a conclusion on this a long time ago.

He thought about what Yodel said in Mindis Hall, and what Arunde said in Renaissance Palace.

The family that was tangled with disaster.

Thales stared at his Nine-Pointed Star symbol and sighed.

His mother was very likely a...

He had always tried his best to not think in this direction before he got a confirmation.

However, he had to investigate and find the answer. Based on the king and Liscia's odd behavior as well as his middle name, he was unwilling to let go of any possible information.

Even if the outcome would not be good.

Gilbert furrowed his brows deeply.

'Indeed. His Highness had started becoming suspicious a long time ago.'

"Your Highness..." Gilbert exhaled while he shook his head and said, "I am not in the position to comment on your origins, but you must know, within your body flows the Jadestar blood, which you have inherited from His Majesty. Your bloodline also originated from the Ancient Empire, which continued on to the Final Empire. It is the most honorable lineage in the history of mankind—the Imperial Family's bloodline, Carlose Family... Maybe there are some unknown secrets that are hidden within this kind of ancient and noble bloodline..."

Thales sighed to himself. 'As expected of a foreign affairs officer. From his expression to his choices of words, he managed to not give anything away.'

'I can only use another way to look for my own mother.'

"Alright, no need to worry too much about me." Thales sat down, still sweating and panting. He shook his own boot to get rid of the sand inside. "Anyway, it is not a bad thing for now."

There was no way there would be such a thing as distinctions of superiority and inferiority in terms of bloodlines and races.

So, the prince replied joyfully, "As for my mother... Anyway, inevitably I will know about her one day. But currently, my top priority is the nation with the dragon flag to the north."

Gilbert was stunned. He glanced at Chora, who was tidying up the training equipment, then looked towards Thales with a troubled gaze. "Your Highness, I think what His

Majesty said when he sent you on a diplomatic mission yesterday was definitely not what he meant literally..."

"I know. The king has his own things to consider." Thales shook off the last of the sand from his boot and stood up.

Gilbert looked at him worriedly. "Exactly... therefore, you totally do not have to... er... be so dispirited..."

"What?"

Thales furrowed his brows.

Then he immediately understood what Gilbert meant.

"Why?"

The prince turned around and laughed as he said, "Did you assume my sword practice just now was a sign of despair or a way to vent out my anger?"

Gilbert raised his eyebrows.

"Oh my God..."

Thales slapped his forehead and laughed bitterly as he said, "Well, since I am about to visit an unfamiliar nation... I still have to prepare myself no matter what. Although a seven-year-old body can do nothing much, at least, I have to practice and familiarize myself with the Northland Military Sword Style and learn how to ride a horse. So, when I am in a dangerous situation, I will at least know how to protect my own life, correct?"

"If I have good luck and I am able to develop the Power of Eradication—"

Gilbert could not help but to cut Thales off. "Your Highness, traditionally, in the Tower of Eradication, the record for the youngest age of those whose Power of Eradication was awakened early due to unique training and extraordinary luck was at least twelve years old. The usual time of awakening is sixteen years old... as for seven years old... er..."

Thales felt awkward and laughed dryly after he heard what Gilbert told him. He

scratched his head in embarrassment as he replied in a low voice, "Is that so? I thought it was the same thing as brushing up the degree of proficiency."

Gilbert was still staring dubiously at him. "But... do you really... have no ill-feelings, and understand His Majesty's intention?"

"What are you even saying? Anyway, I am also a postgraduate with a great ability to resist stress... ahem... I mean, I am the second prince with great mental fortitude..." Thales patted the dirt off himself indifferently and walked towards the study room, preparing to have lunch then practice writing.

"Alright, when I heard him say that he wanted to kill me in order to make up to Eckstedt, I was indeed frightened.

"But I spent an entire night rummaging through documents—Mindis Hall has too little resources, and the order is not logical too. Nonetheless, at least I understand some of His Majesty's intentions now."

Gilbert noticed that Thales either used 'king' or 'His Majesty' to address Kessel the Fifth whenever Thales talked about him. He silently sighed to himself. 'As expected, His Highness still harbors a grudge towards His Majesty in terms of how he acknowledged His Highness the last time.'

"Do you want to listen to my own opinions regarding my diplomatic mission to Eckstedt?" Thales asked as he kneaded his sore nape and grimaced.

Gilbert slightly bowed respectfully. "I am all ears."

...

In the dark.

Morat's unique but hoarse and old voice echoed deeply. "He managed to run away?"

The person who replied him was Raphael, who had a brisk and bright voice, "Our people also feel strange about this. It was almost like the Strange Doctor had already seen through the trap and returned without any hesitation. The assassination team missed him. These past few days, we had been constantly moving back and forth between Eckstedt and Constellation's Eastern Border, which is between Friess Family's Lonely Old Tower and Trentida Family's Reformation Tower. However, they

can no longer find any traces of Ramon."

Morat placed his chin on his palms as he quietly muttered, "Even if the legacy has already been extinct for more than six hundred years, a wizard will always be a wizard. No matter how greatly we view his power, it will never be enough. But it was obvious that he came prepared..."

The Black Prophet slightly lifted his head up. "It is impossible for our trap to miss him. He must have had a helper... Let us temporarily set aside the Black Sword for now. What about the other two main Assassins of the Brotherhood? Reversed Machete and Prison Lock Sickle? Or Cenza and Roda, who are close to supreme class?"

Raphael shook his head helplessly. "From the beginning till the end, we did not obtain any news of Reversed Machete and Prison Lock Sickle appearing anywhere nearby, or find any other reinforcements from the Brotherhood. However..."

Raphael furrowed his brows a little.

On the other hand, Morat's gaze became cold and stern.

Raphael continued, "Actually, within this past week, Anton and Roda of the Six Powerhouses have returned to Eternal Star City. Apart from 'Alpha Wolf' Lazans Fischer, who is still away in the South, Cenza, Roda, Lance, Anton and Morris, five out of the Six Powerhouses are already gathered in the capital—"

Morat raised his hand abruptly and stopped Raphael's report.

His expression kept changing. After he paused for a few seconds, the Black Prophet exhaled deeply.

"All five of them are gathered together? Hmph."

Morat closed his eyes as he shook his head. "I know who Ramon's helper is, and he is not someone from the Brotherhood."

Raphael's eyes showed his confusion.

Morat gently opened his eyes, revealing his penetrating gaze. "The one who first disclosed information to us was Secret Room, but the Secret Intelligence Department's elite assassination team found nothing at the border of the two countries. Is that not

obvious?"

Raphael lifted his head in realization.

Morat stayed silent for a long while.

"Haha," the Black Prophet laughed briskly and said, "It seems like Ramon is not some sort of wizard after all. That old woman from the north has once again played her tricks on us.

"But it is not without reason that she used fake news to attract our attention... She was helping the Brotherhood. As for the latter... what were they trying to hide?

"Withdraw half of the manpower back from the north, and focus on inspecting the Brotherhood's activities during the next few days... There must be a reason for the gathering of the five people..." Morat could not help but laugh. "How dare he make a deal with Eckstedt's Secret Room? Lance, that brat. As expected of my most outstanding disciple apart from Novork..."

Right at this moment, next to Raphael's hand, a violent, loud noise suddenly came from a cage, which was covered with a piece of black cloth. Raphael opened the cage without any expression on his face.

A skull resembling that of a bird and rat, which was roughly the size of a fist, protruded from the cage. It was stained with a bright red, sticky liquid, and its opened mouth was filled with sharp teeth. A piece of paper was passed out before it immediately retreated back into the cage.

Morat did not look at the sinister, strange and creepy creature. He just focused his gaze on Raphael.

The latter was staring at the small piece of paper as his expression became increasingly sour.

Raphael put down the piece of paper, and his face became unprecedentedly serious.

"We received a report, that the two main leaders of Blood Bottle Gang's eight Psionic Warriors, 'Fantasy Blade Edge' Catherine and 'Red Viper' Nikolay, appeared at Revol City one after another.

"And two days ago, our informant at the neighboring Steel City... discovered a trace of the Blood Mystic," Raphael spoke in a solemn tone.

Morat's pupils contracted abruptly!

"It seems like we have caught a big fish..." Morat smiled.

Raphael muttered to himself, "But... surprisingly, he is hidden in Steel City... It has been so many years... Did the dwarfs of the Hall of King's Chronicles not have a clue about this?"

Morat closed his eyes as he shook his head. "Over the past three hundred years, the relationship between the Hall of King's Chronicles and Empress Hellen worsened because of the Sunset Goddess. Even more so, when the Blazing Wind Cannon oddly fell into cooling mode. They did not have any usable legendary anti-mystic equipment on their hands. Even if they knew, they could only pretend to be ignorant about it."

Raphael raised his eyebrows and snorted lightly in response.

"Are you certain that it is the Blood Mystic? What is the specific report?" the Black Prophet held onto his staff in his hands a little tighter as he replied gravely.

However, he immediately noticed Raphael's sorrowful expression as Raphael sighed.

The young man dressed in white lowered his gaze and opened the piece of paper.

"There is no report," he said solemnly.

Morat lifted his head abruptly and his sharp gaze was directed straight at Raphael, waiting for his explanation.

The young man dressed in white exhaled as he replied faintly, "The reason why we were able to discover the Blood Mystic... was because... all thirty-four informants along the way from Steel City to Revol City...

"Died," Raphael said quietly.

"Furthermore... their flesh was scattered in all directions... and none of their bodies were fully intact.

"It matches the Blood Mystic's style in our records..."

He did not continue.

After a while, Morat sighed deeply.

"It is putting up a show to the Secret Intelligence Department, that outside the capital, it can find every single one of us whenever it wants," he spoke with his hoarse voice.

"Indeed, it is that damned... homicidal maniac."

Chapter 75

The Union of Two Kings

Renaissance Palace.

Thud, thud, thud—

An urgent sound of footsteps came from beyond the door.

It was the noise made by high-heeled leather boots, stepping on stone ground.

Boom!

The thick door to the bedroom was abruptly pushed open!

"What exactly is wrong with you?"

An angry, agitated, but crisp female voice could be heard loud and clear.

The maid who was sweeping the floor at the side was so frightened that she immediately lowered her head as she rushed out from the bedroom door. From her peripheral vision, she saw His Majesty's lover, the first-grade female official, the once influential lady of the capital, the legendary police officer, whose exciting life story, filled with ups and downs could be written into a collection of poems by a bard—Jines Bajkovic.

At this very moment, this formidable-looking female official was in a rage as she walked into the room. She was yelling angrily at Kessel the Fifth, who was standing by the window sill.

"Do you really want to murder your own son?!"

In front of the window, the king was looking down at the mass of people below Renaissance Palace. Kessel the Fifth slowly turned around.

"As a king, I have to do this.

"That is all," the dignified voice replied.

Slap!

A resounding sound of a slap could be heard behind the maid.

The maid did not dare dawdle around any longer and she exited the room, drenched in cold sweat.

"He is not only a prince, but is also your flesh and blood! He is not the one who destroyed the Jadestar Royal Family, or the person behind the scheme to harm Constellation!" Jines was extremely furious, and did not show any sign of being aware that she had just ferociously slapped the Supreme King of Constellation.

In a daze, Kessel the Fifth stroked the cheek where he was struck.

An image of the dashing 'Timely Police Officer' with an amazing presence in the past appeared before his eyes.

As well as the first time they met.

She had also greeted him with a slap in the face, did she not?

But the supreme king came back to his senses and said nonchalantly, "Such a coincidence, Yodel also made a similar comment about that boy."

"That boy?" Jines stared in disbelief at the king. "That is your only son!"

"Yes, my only son." Kessel's eyes were flickering with complicated emotions. He took in a deep breath before slowly exhaling. "That is why I have already chosen the best path for him, the trials that a kingdom heir must endure and tolerate."

Trials?

Jines' furrowed brows reflected her struggles as she stared at this robust man in front of her.

Kessel the Fifth inhaled deeply, his eyes were cold like frost. "How can he qualify to be a true king if he has not experience real hell?"

Jines' heart trembled.

Hell?

Hell.

Jines sighed deeply. "Kay, we have to learn to get used to or even... forget some matters..."

The king sneered with an expressionless face. "Is that so?"

He took a step forward and stared directly at Jines. "I have heard the news from Gilbert, that you encountered the assassins on the way to Renaissance Palace.

"Can you truly get used to or even forget those matters?"

Jines' entire frame trembled as she stared at Kessel with a complicated look. Jines raised her trembling hand and placed it upon Kessel's shoulder. She caressed his red, swollen face and said painfully as well as miserably, "Kay, you cannot live in the past forever."

She clenched her teeth lightly and said, "Please."

Kessel the Fifth trembled from head to toe as he looked into Jines' watery eyes and pleading gaze. Grief emerged in his heart.

He quietly replied, "The past is already history. What I see now is only the future."

'Past.

'Future.

'Really?'

Jines gently clenched her teeth as a young and adorable boy appeared before her eyes.

A sting appeared at the back of her eyes, and she almost cried.

The king unconsciously clenched his fist tight when he saw Jines' reaction.

Then he clenched his teeth tightly and closed his eyes resolutely. "As for that boy... Thales... You do not have to worry about him. I will prepare everything for him, everything that a Jadestar needs.

"He will never... never become the next Lydia or Luther..."

Jines' hand trembled slightly.

She lowered her head and put on a miserable smile.

"You know, in this past twenty years, I have gone through numerous interrogations and seen countless meaningful gazes." She gently wrapped her arms around Kessel's waist and leaned into the king's wide embrace.

The female official miserably said, "All of the Jadestars, whether it was Midier or Horace, or even King Aydi, their eyes were always filled with vigilance, apathy and struggles, regardless of whether those emotions were directed to this world or to themselves. And now..."

She leaned against the king's chest and continued with a pained expression on her face. "After that year, your eyes... became the same as theirs."

Kessel's eyes were filled with sorrow when he heard the names of his two elder brothers and the former king.

"But his eyes are different. I can feel that he is different from each and every one of you..."

"It is also a gaze that is not usually seen on a seven-year-old boy..."

The king sighed. "That is because that boy has yet to go through what I have experienced..."

Jines quietly said, "Even if his mother... was that kind of existence."

In that moment, Jines could feel the strong body she was leaning against become momentarily rigid.

The king suddenly wrapped his arms tightly around Jines as he replied with his teeth clenched and his expression full of pain, "You can BE rest assured, Jines, that he will

be alright...

"He will be safe. He will survive.

"Since he is a Jadestar and also the descendant of the Royal Family, more so, the son of that woman—he will be able to survive even in hell. Not to mention, this is merely Eckstedt!"

...

"Kill me in order to take revenge on behalf of Prince Moriah and eliminate King Nuven's hatred. That is what His Majesty said so, right?"

Thales walked into the hall at the ground floor and looked at Gilbert, signalling to the staff in the scullery as he continued. "It seems like Eckstedt is a very dangerous place. After all, we have an old grudge over the 'Fortress Treaty' and after that, their diplomatic group was attacked by the assassins, in which their common-elected king's only son and heir was killed. King Nuven is extremely angry right now, and Eckstedt's suzerains are also thirsting after our territory. Under such circumstances, the Prince of Constellation is practically a sheep among a pack of wolves."

Thales let out a long sigh. "But is my current condition any better than going on a diplomatic mission to Eckstedt in the future?"

Gilbert was slightly stunned.

"As the only heir of Jadestar, since birth, I am already standing on the opposite side against all major suzerains. Look at Nanchester, look at Covendier, not to mention the newly imprisoned Arunde. After all, if I ever run into any accidents, they will have a chance to seize the throne."

Thales walked onto a flight of stairs and walked passed the portrait of the three Kings of Constellation. His eyes reflected his absent-minded state. "Before I appeared, their focus was on His Majesty, but after I appeared, I was destined to be the new target. Even with Renaissance Palace's strength and power, my safety as well as security can never be ensured. There is a proverb from the Far East that says, 'A long spear from the front is easy to evade, but a cold arrow from the shadows is hard to fend against'.

"Comparatively, the suzerains of Eckstedt may want to take advantage of Constellation. Perhaps, they are not happy to see me, but it is not a must for them to

kill me. On the contrary, no matter who stains his hands with the blood of Constellation's prince will be destined to become the public's target for attack. The whole of Constellation will become his enemy. The devoted ones will want to take revenge on behalf of the royal family, and the ambitious ones will want to gain a righteous reputation.

"Eckstedt adopts the king selection system. After the demise of the last elected king, the ten archdukes will choose the next common-elected king during the King Selection Congress to rule for the rest of his life. Every single archduke has a chance and every one of them are competing for it. Eckstedt is even worse than Constellation when it comes to their internal divide.

"Maybe Constellation's power has not yet fully recovered and it does not have enough strength to overtake Eckstedt. But under the temptation of the crown, working together to crush an Eckstedt suzerain will still be more than possible. Also, the other suzerains of Eckstedt will probably gleefully watch by the side and do nothing to see the downfall of their competitor in the King Selection Congress.

"As people from the Far East will say, I am just like 'a can of worms'. No matter which Eckstedt suzerain has me in their territory, not only are they unable to harm me, for their own benefits, they even have to do their best in protecting me."

Gilbert raised his eyebrows.

It seemed like he had been worrying too much. After all, he could tell that His Highness was mature and sensible after many days spent together with him. He was not the type of person who needed other people to worry over him.

"And so, the only person left that I have to worry about in Eckstedt is King Nuven."

Thales walked into the study room and watched the guards bring in his lunch. He smiled at Gilbert, whose eyebrows had smoothened out in obvious relief. "However, this is something that many people may overlook. When Prince Moriah died in Constellation...

"King Nuven was already destined to be an ally of Jadestar Royal Family and myself."

Gilbert finally had a smile on his face.

Thales yawned and sat down on the chair in his study room. He pushed away the

messy books and notes on his desk, which he spent the last night reading through, and said confidently, "Under a situation where there is no direct male heir, Constellation allows female heirs to inherit the father's title, territory and assets. Our Duchess of Blade Edge Hill is someone who is like that.

"But in Eckstedt, females have no right of inheritance... Since the old King Nuven has lost his only male heir, it means that the inheritance in Dragon Clouds City will become a problem. The Walton Family already has no chance in the next selection of the king. They are destined to head into decline.

"Under these circumstances, maybe it will relieve King Nuven's pain and hatred in losing his only son by declaring war towards Constellation, or killing an heir of equivalent importance like me. However, after he calms down, he will realize that this will only lead to the Walton Family's final destruction.

"The possible territories that can be gained through battle or negotiation with Constellation will all be received by our neighboring three archdukes at Southern Eckstedt: the Archduke of Black Sand, the Archduke of Prestige Orchid, and the Archduke of Reformation Tower. Those three archdukes are the most popular candidates for the next King Selection Congress. Even though the territories gained under these circumstances will belong to the Walton Family as their land, it will be taken by the three archdukes in the near future because the lands are far too close to the three of them.

"It also means that, in the conflict between Constellation and the Dragon, the three archdukes who are the greatest beneficiaries will become stronger. As for the Waltons who have already lost their direct heir, they will only become increasingly weaker under King Nuven, and they will eventually perish.

"Under this situation, King Nuven will only try his best to avoid any conflict between Constellation and the Dragon, regardless if it is war or negotiation. He will not let any one of Constellation's territories or resources fall into the hands of the three southern archdukes. That is the only way to maintain even power among Eckstedt's ten archdukes, and to ensure that the weakening Walton Family does not head to its own downfall.

"Also, is there any other huge kingdom other than Constellation, hailed as 'Western Peninsula's Shield', or any other famous, prosperous, and powerful family other than the Jadestar Royal Family, which is a more fitting ally in seizing the attention of the

three southern archdukes as well as exerting pressure upon them? In treating Constellation or the Jadestar Royal Family as their natural ally, plus ensuring the recovery of our strength so that we become even stronger and more powerful than before, only the Walton Family can be assured of the continuation of their family and a chance in the next king selection.

"Under such a scenario, them and us, the Walton Family and Jadestar Royal Family's benefits are unprecedentedly the same.

"Walton and Jadestar are already natural allies.

"Presumably, the act of letting King Nuven 'kill' me is only the king's shocking method to let the other party cool down. After King Nuven's fury is quenched, mutual understanding will grow and sprout in King Nuven as well as King Kessel's hearts at the same time. There will be no need for an agreement, no need for an oath and no need for a negotiation; this is the natural treaty.

"A treaty that belongs to Cloud Dragon Spear Flag's Walton Family and Nine-Pointed Star Flag's Jadestar Family—"The Union of Two Kings'."

Thales sighed deeply. "The Battle of Eradication's two outstanding human heroes, Raikaru and Tormond's respective descendants. How ironic that the two kingdoms are sincerely working together only when the two kingdoms are unprecedentedly hostile towards each other."

Thus, it could be seen just how immature the two feudalistic nations, Constellation and the Dragon were. In a world full of many illogical technologies, it was still apparently a feudal society. On the surface, the highest ruler had authority over foreign affairs and military affairs, but in reality, the highest ruler was skating on thin ice and had to be very alert, being in a life or death struggle with territorial suzerains.

'The state's autonomy is truly pathetically limited and painfully weak.'

The prince put away his past memory and lifted his head while he continued his speech. "And so, compared to Constellation that is seemingly peaceful but in reality, very dangerous due to the threats lurking in every corner, Eckstedt that is seemingly dangerous and hostile but is actually safe and secure is the best place for me to go. This should be the true intention of His Majesty."

'Hopefully.'

Thales added, at the bottom of his heart.

The image of the expressionless king appeared before his eyes. 'After all... I cannot see affection in the king's eyes.'

He snapped back to his senses and said with a smile on his face, "And so, I, as a representative of the Jadestar Royal Family, may encounter King Nuven's test in Dragon Clouds City. Maybe some mean people will deliberately make things difficult for me, maybe I will be ridiculed by the suzerains and become their bargaining chip in confronting Constellation. I may even face conspiracies from different forces with different motives. However, it is still safer for me to be there than to be in Constellation..."

In the next second, Thales' eyes shone brilliantly with intense confidence and affirmation.

"Therefore, I will survive!"

Gilbert started to chuckle.

However, in the next moment, he immediately lifted his head and said seriously, "Since you think of it that way, Your Highness, I have nothing to worry about anymore. I came here today to discuss the candidates for your diplomatic group, and also the candidates for your attendants."

Thales nodded.

Gilbert bowed slightly. "But before that... Your Highness, there is someone who would like to meet you."

"Meet me?" Thales had just picked up his knife and fork. He raised his brows when he heard of Gilbert's request.

'To meet me at this very moment?'

Thales nonchalantly picked up a piece of potato and put it into his mouth. "If the person is attracted by my fame and wishes to see the last of Jadestar's Prince with similar interest as looking at a rare animal, please reject the request on my behalf. Be more polite in your wording, I have already offended way too many people."

However, Gilbert shook his head.

"No, I think this person is one of the very few people who want to visit you regardless of your identity as a prince. In fact, a little over a month, he has been recuperating from his wounds in the barracks located at the back."

"Are you saying...?" Thales seemed to recall something as he lifted his head in astonishment.

Thud, thud

These sounds came from outside the study room.

Gilbert nodded and lamented. "He suffered such serious injuries, and could only eat with the help of tubes. Even the doctors thought that he would not survive, but his will to live is indeed astonishing, and we never had a shortage of medication as well as drugs."

Gilbert cleared the path to the entrance of the study as he sighed slightly.

"Come in, this is the person that you insisted to meet.

"The Second Prince of Constellation, Prince Thales Jadestar."

Thales placed down his cutleries and furrowed his brows tightly together.

The person's left hand was wrapped in thick bandages and secured with a wooden plank. He was holding onto a pair of crutches, and his actions showed that he was clearly unfamiliar with it. He could be seen limping into Thales' room with strenuous effort.

There was a horrible scar of knotted flesh on his throat and his legs were only to his knees.

Even though he had stubbles on his face, and his entire figure had become terribly thin, and he had even gotten a haircut and the tattoo on his face had faded a lot, Thales still managed to recognize him immediately. The man who once wept in despair, but had now recovered from his serious injuries.

Phantom Wind Follower.

Midira Ralf.

Chapter 76

Togedwer With You

Ralf was once the hope of Blood Bottle Gang, the only supra class elite among the Strongest Twelve. After going through hell and despair, he finally met Thales again after a month.

"Congratulations, you struggled through it in the end." Thales smiled and nodded. "You didn't lose to this damned world."

Ralf trembled slightly and opened his mouth abruptly. His throat, which was a mesh of blood and flesh, trembled slightly. However, he could only mutter a bunch of indecipherable grunts.

He also knew that he was unable to say anything now.

In such a situation, Thales did not know how to react for a moment. He scratched his head. "It's okay, if you have anything to say, just write it down with a pen."

Ralf's gaze dimmed.

"We have tried." Gilbert sighed. "He is illiterate. Apart from numbers, he is not even able to write his own name."

Hearing this, Ralf closed his eyes in shame. He lowered his head even more. Thales felt a little awkward.

He almost forgot that Ralf earned a living by being in a gang. Thales, who used to be a child beggar, knew that most people who joined gangs had an unfortunate life. They did not have much chance to receive a proper education because they were busy earning a living through illegal activities every day.

But in the next moment, to Thales' astonishment, Ralf gritted his teeth, supported himself with his crutch with difficulty, and then lowered his disabled body. Before the small and weak Thales...

He made a deep bow.

Thales sighed. "Alright, I have received your thanks."

Ralf raised his head and his body was trembling. He looked at Thales.

"What are your plans after this? Do you have anywhere else you can go? I don't really suggest that you return to Blood Bottle Gang..."

Ralf trembled slightly.

'Back to Blood Bottle Gang? Back under Big Sister... Catherine's wings?' Looking at his own legs, a pained expression appeared on his face. 'And then there's Nikolay... '

Thinking of his foe who had stabbed him from the back, Ralf's eyes shone with a brilliant light. A few seconds later, Ralf exhaled with his psionic ability and dejectedly shook his head.

Thales stared intently at him.

"Alright then." The prince flashed a smile. "Then you can stay at my place for the time being... We can probably afford to keep you."

Ralf's eyes brightened up.

This boy... apart from being his lifesaver, he also had a very socially influential status...

Thales turned his head and looked towards Count Caso. "Gilbert, how much time do we have until we depart for Eckstedt?"

Gilbert smiled as he spoke, "It depends on the time the messenger crow takes to reach and contact Dragon Clouds City. It will be at least three days and at most a week, Your Highness."

"That should be enough." Thales nodded and looked at Ralf. "During these few days, come to my study room during the day."

Ralf looked surprised.

The confident and optimistic boy, who let him choose between 'freedom' and 'struggle'

when he was in a hopeless predicament, flashed a smile.

"I will teach you how to read and write, and how to speak with hand gestures."

.....

The captain of the city defense team who was affiliated to Eastern City District Police Station, the thirty-one-year-old Genard laid in the dungeon of Vine Manor.

He was panting. His body was covered in wounds. He was bound in heavy shackles and could not move.

But a voice inside his heart told him that he must not... must not open his mouth.

No matter how the followers of these great nobles tortured and beat him up, no matter how they threatened and tried to bribe him...

No matter how much they wanted to know about the background of those cavaliers that appeared outside Vine Manor that night at Eastern City District...

He must keep his lips sealed.

After the National Conference ended, Genard was discharged from his duty of maintaining order in Star Plaza. The very next day, his boss came to his site of duty in Eastern City District with a group of police officers. His boss read out Genard's offences in front of him and all the soldiers under him. Somebody reported him for being engaged in corruption while he was on duty in Eastern City District.

Genard immediately sighed.

It was not because this was a false accusation. Instead, it was because in Eastern City District, the act of receiving gratuities from nobles had long since been a universally acknowledged custom and common practice.

Every single soldier from the city defense team, and even the police officers, would collect this kind of tip. The police station was also well aware of this. Every time, they would receive commissions and reap some profits. This was also the only extra income Genard could obtain for his teammates, whose wages were extremely low.

Why was he the only one who was reported? The faces of the soldiers under him were

also filled with shock.

However, Genard, who had been hanging around Eastern City District for almost twelve years now, knew that he must have offended an important personage.

Under the hostile gazes of ten police officers, Genard only had enough time to give his treasured saber—which he had kept in good condition for twelve years, and which he could never bear to be apart from—to the subordinate that showed the most promise in his team. That saber was a present that was casually given to him by the Duke of Star Lake after the Major Retreat from Walla Passage as he saw that Genard did not have any weapons. ("Take this as an exchange for the flour in your hands. Thanks to you, at least we can have a good meal."—Duke John) There was even the Nine-Pointed Star emblem on it. With his hands and legs chained and head covered, he was then brought to a manor by carriage.

The carriage took many turns, but Genard had patrolled Eastern City District for over ten years. The habit he cultivated from his days as a soldier in the Starlight Brigade to observe and remember the roads was also never abandoned. How could he not recognize that this was the Covendier Family's Vine Manor, which he passed by three times each day during patrols?

A group of people—who obviously used to be soldiers—tortured Genard for two full days for no other reason than wanting to ask about the group of cavaliers who burst into Eastern City District that night, and had even possibly broken into Covendier Family's Vine Manor...

They wanted to ask about the origins of those cavaliers.

However, Genard must not tell them. He must not tell them.

There was no other reason than because the group of cavaliers... were under the Nine-Pointed Star... they were from the Jadestar Royal Family.

That was John's Nine-Pointed Star. The Duke of Star Lake's Nine-Pointed Star. Starlight Brigade's Nine-Pointed Star. That was the Nine-Pointed Star the once ignorant Genard fought under tirelessly while burning with righteous ardor.

There were so many of his battle companions under that flag!

Twelve years ago, he had once roamed about the battle-stricken land numbly. He went

through cold, hunger, pain, and suffering. Every day, in a daze, he witnessed murder, arson, rape, and robbery.

That was until Genard foolishly entered the city. Just as he was so hungry that his head was dizzy and his eyes blurred, he had ignorantly walked towards the army enlistment office.

Then, he met the witty, confident, optimistic and friendly Duke of Star Lake, and his Starlight Brigade.

He was a nineteen-year-old young man from a peasant family who was often bullied, was foolish ignorant, and lacked the means to survive. In Starlight Brigade, he learned for the first time how to work together with others, he understood how it was like to sacrifice himself selflessly, he was accepted and praised, he was taught to read and write, he raised his sword and cried out in celebration of victory, he sang joyfully around a campfire, he made the decision to act as the rear-guard for his comrades.

He also understood for the first time that in the world, there existed more important things than to be well-fed and to keep living.

There, he felt more like a human instead of a barbaric beast who only cared about looking for food and satisfying his hunger.

The duke's team of personal guards and the Starlight Brigade was his home, the place he belonged to, and his everything. It was a place where he thought he would fight bravely for the rest of his life.

That was until the tragedy in Zodra, that disgraceful and detestable betrayal, that contemptible and lowly surprise attack, that cowardly stab in the back.

That was until the duke calmly laid among all the members of his team of personal guards. Amid the entire brigade's regretful and furious wails, the duke earnestly advised them to 'take care of themselves'. He then smiled with tears in his eyes, closed his eyes, and left forever.

This was... the team of personal guards' fault. This was their sin.

'If we had realized sooner at that time... If I reacted a bit sooner... Then, the duke wouldn't have... Our home wouldn't have... '

Therefore, when the soldiers from the noble family scornfully insulted him, interrogated him, beat him, and threatened him to have him reveal the identity of those cavaliers who were also under the Nine-Pointed Star...

Genard felt that his refusal to yield, his perseverance, silence, and even the injuries that covered his entire body, to the point where he was barely alive, were all a type of atonement.

At least, this would slightly soothe his soul that had been feeling guilt, regret and self-blame for the past twelve years. It enabled him to, more or less, atone and repent after these twelve years, where he lost all interest in life and felt extremely numb.

It was all for the place he once called 'home'. For his responsibility as a member of the team of personal guards to the duke who may be gone but will always be remembered by Genard.

"My master just wants to confirm some things." The white-haired old man was calmly enquiring from outside the jail cell door again.

"He just wants to know about the identity of those cavaliers. That is all. I swear in my master's honor that he is not planning to harm those cavaliers."

Genard gritted his teeth and kept quiet.

"Who would see your persistence? Similarly, no one would see your weakness either. You just have to give us some information. Just a little. No one will know."

Genard continued to keep his lips shut tight.

"We know that you definitely know something. All your soldiers said that they had no flag nor emblem. So, are they people you know? Were they once your comrades, or friends who you would sacrifice your life for?"

Gerald still kept his mouth shut. The white-haired old man sighed and left the dungeon.

Genard relaxed his jaws. Panting, he crumpled down onto the floor. He made it through again.

However, unknown to him, Ashford, the old butler of the Covendier Family headed to

the top floor of Vine Manor. He respectfully bowed to his young master, the Guardian Duke of the South Coast, Zayen Covendier. He then said, "I have gotten an answer. Those cavaliers belong to the Jadestar Family."

Zayen turned from the window which was filled with the smell of blood. His expression was a contemplative one.

"I thought that he kept refusing to say anything no matter what?"

Ashford said expressionlessly, "For some things, we can obtain answers even if the other party does not say anything. Genard used to be in the Starlight Brigade and was even a member of the personal guards belonging to John Jadestar, the Duke of Star Lake and also the Starlight God of War. After Sonia Sasere dismissed the original Starlight Brigade, as one of the people who refused to travel north to the Broken Dragon Fortress, he retired and became a police officer."

Zayen's gaze flickered around, as if deep in thought.

Ashford nodded slightly. "It is obvious that he is an outstanding and strong soldier. If there is something about those cavaliers that made him keep quiet no matter what, it is most probably related to the things he experienced when he was serving in the military.

"I believe that with his rich experience as part of the brigade and in expeditions, he saw through the background of those cavaliers with no flag or banner. Due to the camaraderie he formed with those who were also from the Jadestar Family when he was in Starlight Brigade, he insisted on keeping their identities a secret."

Zayen stared at his old butler for a few seconds.

In the end, he sighed.

"So, the only ones that fit the description is the Jadestar Private Army from Mindis Hall, and after yesterday, the new prince directly returned to Mindis Hall before the public eye. So, he's the royal treasure missing from Mindis Hall?"

Zayen shook his head and chuckled softly. "Hmph, I'm afraid that the so-called royal treasure that went missing from Mindis Hall before this was that new prince! Nikolay captured that brat and brought him to Vine Manor... That was why they simply broke in and snatched him back in secret.

"Ashford, did you know that we held the kingdom's fate in our hands twice? Twice!" Zayen raised his head and shut his eyes tight. "In the end, every time, we let him escape."

Ashford calmly lowered his head and did not speak.

After a long while.

"Treat the injuries of that soldier from Starlight Brigade," Zayen said coldly.

Ashford raised his gaze. It carried hints of puzzlement.

"You know... No matter what, I owe that brat one..." Zayen clenched his fists tightly as he spoke, his eyes blazing with fury. "And I do not want to hesitate when I take action against him."

Without hesitation, Zayen turned and left the manor which smelled heavily of blood.

"Did you know, sir?"

Behind him, Ashford flashed a mysterious smile. "You are more and more like the previous duke."

Without turning his head, Zayen scornfully replied, "And be as foolish as him, with relatives plotting against me behind my back to have my throat cut in my own bedroom without realizing it?"

Ashford shook his head slightly and sighed deeply. He lowered his head and reported another matter, "Sir, there was news from Jade City... Lady Hille..."

Ashford glanced at his master's expression. He looked as if he wanted to continue, but hesitated.

Zayen stopped walking. The young duke sucked in a breath, as if he was preparing for something.

His tone was ice-cold. "Go ahead and speak. What ridiculous thing has my adorable but foolish twelve-year-old sister done again?"

Hearing this, Ashford bowed deeply and carefully said, "Miss Hille has already

departed for Sera Dukedom five days ago, protected by Lord Cassain. None of the followers dared to stop her."

Zayen turned his head and looked at Ashford.

He put on a bewildered expression, furrowed his brows and said, "Sera? The Sera Dukedom that became scattered and disunited after the archduke was assassinated? Is that place not troubled by a plague recently?"

Ashford bowed slightly. "The reason she gave to the public was that she wanted to aid the people, who are deeply troubled by the plague. However, your humble servant suspects that she found information about that organization."

'That organization?'

Zayen's expression immediately became frost-cold. His face twitched, as if he was thinking of something that he could not tolerate...

Until he suddenly emitted an outburst, "Is it not enough that she has caused her own parents' deaths?"

The duke's voice was filled with fury and hatred. "What sort of disaster does she still want to bring back to the Covendiers?"

Ashford did not speak. After more than ten seconds, Zayen sighed heavily.

In the end, he still swung his arm to show that he wanted to make an order. "Dispatch more men and ensure her safety." Zayen shut his eyes tight and gritted his teeth. He angrily said, "And... ensure that her identity is kept a secret. It absolutely, absolutely, absolutely cannot be revealed..."

His voice trembled, and he repeated 'absolutely' three times.

Ashford nodded slightly and considerably left the hall of the manor before the duke.

After the butler was a distance away, Zayen trembled as he held on to a pillar.

Bang!

He punched the pillar hard!

After that, the Duke of Tricolor Iris Flowers leaned his head against the pillar. He exhaled in anguish.

'The oversight and failure before this... there cannot be a second time... I must not fail. Must not fail!

'I must become king. I must.

'Only by becoming the supreme king... Only by taking control of all the power in Constellation... Or else... Hille...

'Who else in the world can protect you? Who else can protect... such a person like you?'

.....

Mindis Hall, the cellar.

"Congwatuwations, my alwy, Prince Thales, the second pwince."

Serena, the silver-haired, red-eyed loli of over four-hundred years old and a refugee from the Night Kingdom, looked at Thales with a complicated expression.

"We could cwearly hear the cheers in Star Pwaza from here."

Thales narrowed his eyes as he spoke in resignation, "This is a bit too much... the distance from here to Star Plaza... All in all, our alliance has moved a step closer to its aim."

Without blushing at all—Thales had his suspicions on whether she even had the ability of blushing—Serena cut him off and continued speaking, "Now, we will wait for the time you are cwowned as king. Then, you can help me regain my thwone. Do not worwy, I will do ewewything in my power to help you."

Under the Everlasting Lamp, Thales' face became steely. 'Do everything in your power to help me?

'She's talking as though I am not the only heir to the kingdom, and without her help, I won't be able to inherit the kingdom.

'On the contrary, her competitor and opponent, the 'Weeper' or something from the Night Kingdom, the Night Queen... '

Thales could only feel a headache coming.

He spat mentally, 'This calculative, scheming old witch who does everything she can to profit off others...

'Me being crowned, and you regaining your throne? Old witch, can we change the order?'

But in the end, he did not voice his complaints.

Thales let out a fake cough. "Then, you must have heard that I am heading to Eckstedt soon."

Serena nodded and flashed a mysterious smile.

'This mortal brat. Did you think that I don't know what you are planning?'

"Before I leave, I will entrust you all to... erm, my father..." Thales carefully chose his words.

"I will go with you."

Thales continued nodding, thinking of what to say next. "...You are after all, an important member of another kingdom's government, he definitely will not be a poor host..."

"I only fowow you."

Thales' voice gradually became softer.

"What?" he furrowed his brows as he spoke in bewilderment.

"I am saying that I want to be togedwer with you." Serena cracked a smile. This red-eyed girl who looked like she was six or seven ("Eh, didn't she looked like she was only five or six the last time I saw her? Is it possible that she grew slightly?"-Thales) opened her mouth and said with a lisp, "We still have anodwer cwause which states that you have pwovide bwood to me once ewevy month, do we not?"

Thales lamented in his heart.

"Also, allies definitely should not be too far apart from each other... I still need to guarantee your safety."

The Prince of Constellation rolled his eyes again.

'Together with me... it is to guarantee your OWN safety, isn't it?'

The thing he was worried about the most had happened, but at that moment, Gilbert's voice rang from outside the door, "Good day to all three of you... Sir Corleone, Sir Corleone, and Lady Corleone... You are all truly responsible. Chora, relax a little."

Soon after, there was knocking on the door outside the cellar.

Count Caso's voice rang from the other side of the door. "I apologize for interrupting your discussion, Prince Thales and Archduchess Corleone. However... Eckstedt's reply has arrived... faster than we expected."

Chapter 77

Queen, Princess and Fate (One)

"In short... below this line are all daily words starting with the letter 'P', which I have already explained about just now. If you cannot remember, there are pictures that act as hints on the side. As for why the words starting with the letters 'Ph' are not pronounced like this... Do not ask me, it is alright for you to just memorize them..."

Thales' voice resounded in the study room.

"All of these materials were prepared by Gilbert for me, but now, it seems like my progress has surpassed the level of these materials by a little. However, this is just enough for you to use."

'Surpassed by a little?'

Gilbert was looking around at the entrance when he furrowed his brows slightly while he saw Thales passing the word list to Ralf, who was unable to speak.

He did not really agree (it could even be said that he firmly opposed it) that during such a critical moment, Thales still spent time on teaching Ralf (even though indeed, no one could replace His Highness in teaching Ralf with his own mysterious yet meaningful set of sign language), to the extent that it interfered with his own studies. However, when he thought of the prince's diplomatic mission to Eckstedt approaching soon, what the prince truly needed was a trusted subordinate, not those complicated and tedious information. Gilbert would then sigh at the thought and continue to stand at the entrance, allowing His Highness to treat his subordinate with courtesy as well as carry out his actions in order to win over support. At least, that seemed like what he was doing from Gilbert's perspective.

Eckstedt's written reply had arrived the day prior. But when Baron Lasalle, the seemingly on edge emergency envoy, showed the contents of the letter, even old Duke Cullen with the best self-control could not help but to furrow his brows tightly together.

Compared to the bloody handprints on the first sealed letter of credentials, this

current letter seemed more concise and composed.

On the letter was King Nuven's own handwriting.

However, there were only three extremely strong words.

"Let him come."

No terms and conditions, no declaration, no mention of the two kingdoms' conflict and no comments on Archduke Lampard's actions—there was no other supplementary content in the letter.

After Kessel the Fifth finished reading the letter, he also remained stoic. He did not express anything, but only gave an official order: After three days, the second prince and his diplomatic group shall head north towards Eckstedt, towards Dragon Clouds City.

Gilbert could not help but feel nervous.

After Baron Lasalle conveyed King Nuven's statement, he was covered in his sweat as he bade his farewell, after which he returned to his home country. Gilbert guessed that the process of meeting His Majesty that day and also Lasalle's performance had probably made their way back to Eckstedt. Lasalle probably would have to make his decision between King Nuven and Archduke Lampard by the time he returned to his country.

While he was thinking, Thales' voice continued to come through.

"Alright, next, we are going to revise the sign language from just now. How do you express 'sorry'?"

Ralf furrowed his brows. He was flipping and searching through the papers that were full of pictures beside his hand. He raised his head and lifted his right palm in confusion, then lightly moved it in a circular motion in front of his chest.

"Incorrect. That is 'please'. You have to clench your palm into a fist... yes, that is 'sorry'."

Ralf clumsily clenched his right fist and moved it in a circular motion in front of his chest.

Opposite the Phantom Wind Follower, Thales nodded lightly without even lifting his head.

Half of his attention was on Ralf while the other half was focused on his right hand, which was holding a book titled 'From the Final Empire to Constellation' underneath the table.

That is right. While Thales was teaching Ralf sign language, he was also flipping and reading what he needed to under the desk. The book was something that he could not let Gilbert know about, especially since it was about calamities, about Mystics.

Thales was dying to understand these secrets that were related to him. Especially after the last assassination attempt in which he suspected he had used mystic energy. He was constantly deeply concerned about that excruciating pain, which felt like it could almost rip his whole body apart. Would it be his time of death the next time he used mystic energy?

But as if he was pushed by fate, from the National Conference to the meeting of Eckstedt's diplomats, then being sent onto a diplomatic mission, there was no time for him to stop and investigate the truth about himself and the Mystics.

If Eckstedt's matter had not been that urgent, and this was added on with Ralf's arrival, Thales would have had an excuse to shorten his daily classes with Gilbert. Thus, he could use that extra time to teach Raff sign language. It was impossible for him to read these materials that would trigger suspicion during Gilbert's classes. He also wanted to be open about his curiosity towards Mystics in exchange for a chance to find information about the Mystics without hiding. However, who knew if the books he read would have been recorded down and passed to Kessel, or even passed to Morat?

So, he could only disguise his motives in his daily life. He stole time to investigate his own secret, just like he did today.

As for the excruciating pain after he lost control during the assassination attempt in front of the palace, it made Thales even more worried and alarmed. How many more abnormalities did his body have? When would these abnormalities expose his own secrets?

Thales had a premonition that every secret lay within his origins, including the secrets

on his mysterious mother, the Head Ritual Master, Liscia's deeply confidential and peculiar attitude, the suspicious conversation between the king and the Head Ritual Master during the Bloodline Ceremony, and other things.

'The Truth About My Mother' was listed as number two by Thales in his list— The Five Big Unsolved Mysteries About Me. Its ranking was before 'Bloody Year', 'Flashbacks' and also 'Abnormal Body', and only below the most pressing matter, 'The Mystery of Mystics'.

He had to save himself in this dangerous world.

Thales could not help but sigh when he came to that thought.

"What about 'thank you'? How do you make that sign?" he simply asked.

Ralf searched for that piece of picture with much difficulty, and clumsily used the tip of his right palm to gently touch his chin. He then flipped his hand with his palm facing outwards.

Thales' gaze flickered between Ralf and the book. Right at this very moment, his eyesight started to blur again.

Wu Qiren's voice echoed in his ears.

"Miss, are you going to the special school again to be a volunteer for the disabled?"

"Yes. Ah, do not use such a derogatory term while addressing them. They are not disabled or ill. Every time you address them in this manner, you are isolating them from normal society. You should use terms such as 'people with physical obstructions' or 'people with physical inconveniences'."

"Haih... I have always thought that you should focus on your degree, instead of spending your time on this matter so that you can be of an influence from the plane of social construct and upgrade special education. After all, you alone are not enough. The inconveniences they face in their daily lives will not become better with your occasional actions. This is not the way to change society."

"Wu Qiren! It is not their fault that they encounter inconveniences in their lives. In fact, it is because of people in the society like us, who do not fulfill our responsibilities of enabling every single person to live in society without obstacles regardless of his or

her condition. If we can be considerate and design individual washrooms for children with heights below 120cm in order for them to live without obstacles in this society, so why can we not let a deaf or mute person communicate with others without any barriers and let them live without obstructions in this society?"

"Eh, when did you become a person with such morals that only those from social sciences would have?"

"This is not morals but fundamental values! Your claims that the 'right way of promoting society's improvement stems from a holistic structure' is problematic! I do not believe that someone who does not even bother to sympathize and help the surrounding community will make genuine contributions towards the society. I am talking about you, Wu Qiren!"

"Stop! This serious conversation ends here, we shall depart now."

"Eh? Where to?"

"I am sending you to the special school! Didn't you say wanted to become a volunteer?!"

"Ahhhh! Wu Qiren! Are you going too? You have definitely been influenced by my brimming integrity, am I right? You are going to learn sign language with me, it's a deal!"

"Eh... I am just sending you over to—"

"I do not care! You have to be with me! Otherwise, you are not allowed to enter my room tonight!"

Thales shook his head with all of his strength to once again hide those few profound, deeply impressionable but untouchable memories of the past at the back of his brain.

He shifted his focus back to the present.

"Not bad, let us increase the degree of difficulty... 'Try it again'...No, no, no, what I meant was how do you gesture the sign language of 'try it again'?"

Thales flipped two pages of 'From the Final Empire to Constellation' while Ralf was covered with sweat, searching for the drawing.

The value of this book was lower than the last book. Basically, the book consisted of a compilation of fictional legends and long-winded chronicles of major events. The book failed to describe the 'calamities' in the Battle of Eradication clearly. It was just like how ordinary people treated the Battle of Eradication, a boring program in Dark Night Temple. Many people even believed that the world was originally made up of two peninsulas... eh?

Thales furrowed his brows.

A piece of paper fell out from a wedge between two pages of the thick book.

Thales gently picked up the piece of paper.

The color of the old parchment was already faded. That particular paper seemed older than the old 'From the Final Empire to Constellation' book he was holding, where turning its pages itself was already being a huge problem for him despite it being remarkably maintained.

The side profile of a teenage girl was drawn onto the parchment with an erasable black pen.

The young girl in the drawing seemed gentle and graceful. She was smiling pleasantly and her plain face was pure like a lotus flower. She had a multi-pointed star earring hanging down from her left ear.

Was this piece of paper which was obviously older than the book randomly used as a bookmark by one of the people from the older generation?

Thales had a puzzled expression on his face. He moved his gaze downwards and discovered a signature.

T.C.K.J

Those four letters were probably the initials of the painter.

Just as Ralf was clumsily gesturing the sign, Thales flipped the parchment over and saw a word scrawled on the back.

[Enemy!]

The word ended with a huge exclamation mark.

Enemy?

Thales shook his head, unable to make sense of its meaning.

Gilbert's voice suddenly came through. "Your Highness, sorry to interrupt you!"

Thales remained calm and collected as he stuffed the parchment into his bosom. He closed the book and secretly kicked it to an unremarkable corner.

The prince lifted his head and smiled towards Gilbert.

"His Majesty has just sent news." Gilbert tipped his hat towards Thales as he bowed down slightly. "He hopes that you will make a trip to Renaissance Palace before you depart, so that the family gathering of the royal family members will be whole."

"Family gathering?" Thales opened his mouth in shock. "What family?"

'Aren't the Jadestars already...?'

At this very moment, the figure of the first-grade female official appeared behind Gilbert.

"Just follow me," Jines said faintly.

Her gaze towards Thales was filled with pity and lament.

...

Renaissance Palace.

Jines was walking in her high-heeled boots while leading Thales, who was already dressed, up the cold stone stairs. "Since you have already been recognized as a prince, you have to meet your mother-in-name. Even though she is not your biological mother... but at least, before you leave for Eckstedt..." Her voice was cold when she said this.

Mother?

Thales asked in astonishment, "What mother?"

"Your father's only wife, of course." Jines's face was clouded with unbearable sorrow. "Queen Keya."

Thales was stunned for a few seconds.

They stopped outside of a palace room.

"His Majesty is too busy, so he will not come over today," Jines stared at the closed door and whispered.

Deep doubt crept into Thales' heart.

'He could not even attend his own family gathering?

'Is he just letting his newfound son meet the queen by himself?'

But Jines' mind was apparently not on this father-son pair.

At the next moment, the female official said towards the puzzled Thales in a serious and solemn tone, "No matter what happens later, do not be surprised or afraid."

Before Thales could come back to his senses from his absent-minded state, Jines had already pushed the door open and walked into the room.

Jines cautiously said, "Keya, I am here."

Thales followed behind the female official as he slowly stepped into the room.

The wide room was decorated in a simple manner, but it had its own unique style that gave out an elegant aura.

A lady who was probably in her forties stood before them. Her fresh face was soft and elegant, and she was dressed in a luxurious star blue gown. She turned around to look at Jines and Thales.

"Jines, here you are!" This gorgeous lady, Queen Keya gave out a genuine and delighted smile. "This is wonderful! Recently Kessel has been so busy over the diplomatic relations with Eckstedt, and I thought you would probably be busy too..."

Thales was slightly reserved. After all, he was the king's illegitimate child.

At the same time, he was also surprised over the current scene. If Jines was the king's lover, then why would Keya get along so well with her as the queen?

"I mentioned this to you before, this person who would come and meet you today..." Jines paused for a moment, as though she felt like there was no need for her to talk about this too much. Hence, she took a deep breath and pulled Thales forward as she said silently, "This is Thales, Kessel's second... son."

"That means, you are the one?" Keya slowly walked towards Thales and crouched down slightly in front of him. "Kessel's youngest son?"

Her gentle eyes looked straight at Thales.

Thales felt like he could not breathe properly due to his awkwardness.

Her Majesty the Queen stroked his head with an affectionate expression on her face. "Do not be afraid, I am also your family. Look at your eyes and nose... they look exactly the same as your charismatic mother."

Thales suddenly stopped breathing and widened his eyes.

Mother?

He could only listen to Queen Keya's gentle and sincere voice as she continued, "...I hope you can also inherit your mother's wits, erudition and also her smooth eloquence in every endeavor. Hehe... After all, there are very few females who are as outstanding as her and Jines."

'Charismatic.

'Intelligent and an erudite.

'Eloquent in every endeavor?'

Thales eagerly kept those information in that specific region named 'Mother' in his brain.

It was the key for many of the unsolved mysteries about him.

Jines' expression became sour as she hastily replied, "Alright... Keya, if there is nothing important... I still have to bring him around... You know, soon, he will be heading towards Eckstedt."

Thales felt strange. Why would Jines be this nervous in front of this gentle and kind queen?

Also, why did she want to end this meeting in such a hurry?

"Oh dear, poor child." Queen Keya sighed. "I have never been to Eckstedt, but I have heard about it. That place is uncivilized, crude, and advocates violence as well as battle. You are only so young... I am afraid that you will have to suffer hardship."

"Er, thank you for your concern..." Even Thales, who was smooth and slick when it came to dealing with people, could hardly withstand a harmonious and happy scene that would only appear in a family with a stranger. His voice was stiff when he replied, "No, this is His Majesty's order... this is also Jadestar's mission."

Queen Keya chuckled lightly. "Jadestar's mission... they always say it that way."

Jines suddenly voiced up stiffly, "Alright, Keya, he has other tasks to complete. We shall leave now..."

'Something's off.'

Thales furrowed his eyebrows.

'There must be something wrong.'

'But... which part exactly of this is wrong?'

Chapter 78

The Queen, the Princess and Fate (Two)

Keya rose and put on a pleasantly surprised expression. "No, do not leave so soon. That's right! He has not met his brother and sister yet!"

Thales' heart shuddered.

"Keya!" Jines cried loudly. Her tone was filled with... panic?

However, Queen Keya only turned her head back and walked towards the large bed that was a distance away.

"Lydia and Luther will definitely be very happy to have a younger brother..."

Thales finally realized what was wrong with this room.

His pupils shrank rapidly. The gentle and considerate Queen Keya took out...

...two rag dolls from the bed.

On the other hand, Jines' face was pale.

"Look, Luther, this is your younger brother Thales. Quick, say hello!"

Keya happily played with the rag doll in her left hand. She raised its hand and waved it at Thales, flashing a joyful smile.

Thales furrowed his brows hard.

While speaking happily, Keya raised the rag doll in her right hand and moved its head towards Thales. "And you, Lydia. Sit properly. You cannot be naughty anymore. Quick, greet your younger brother!"

Keya was even laboriously swaying her own right hand, as if the rag doll in her bosom was struggling intensely. It was truly an extremely bizarre scene.

Thales' breathing was starting to become uneven. 'Could it be that... '

The prince was in disbelief. This beautiful and elegant queen was playing with the two... rag dolls in her bosom with a happy expression.

'This... this is... '

"Enough, Keya!"

Jines' breathing was rapid. She walked forward quickly, and the first thing she did was to pull Thales away.

But Queen Keya's expression quickly changed.

"Eh? Why?"

Keya looked at the rag dolls in her bosom, and then at Thales. Her expression suddenly became very strange, and her tone became a flustered one. "Why, Luther... Why are you not- not even as tall as your younger brother, Thales?"

Thales gritted his teeth and took a step back.

The next moment, as if she had seen something unbelievable, Keya's expression became frightened and terrified.

Plop!

The rag doll in her right hand fell softly on the ground, but it seemed that Queen Keya did not realize it at all.

She only looked towards the rag doll in her left hand with a pained expression filled with sadness and despair. She cried, "I know. You became shorter because you lack... lack..."

Gritting her teeth, Jines told Thales, "Go! Leave first."

However, Thales was already so stunned he could not move.

Keya gripped onto that rag doll tightly with her hands.

After a second, Keya began crying in agony. At the same time, she said something that made Thales absolutely terrified.

"Luther! Luther... head... head... you do not have a head! Luther, your head, where is your head? Where did your head go? Ah? Your head... fell?"

Keya raised her tear-filled face and yelled in panic. She laid face-down on the ground, looking around and fumbling about. "Quick! Quick! We have to look for your head!"

Watching this, Thales' blood froze.

Jines went forward straightaway and hugged Queen Keya, stabilizing the trembling queen with great effort.

Keya abruptly looked towards Jines with her eyes wide open. "You! Have you seen—seen Luther's head? It is about this big... It is round... and rolls... With two eyes..."

Thales watched the scene in front of his eyes in disbelief.

Keya abruptly began struggling, and waved her arms frantically!

"Do not! Do not stop me! I want to protect him! I want to protect Luther! My son!"

Jines gritted her teeth, desperately pulling her towards the bed. At that moment, a hand softly held Thales' arm from behind him.

Thales jumped in fright!

He—having yet to calm down from the fear he felt from what he had witnessed—turned his head abruptly around.

The one who held his arm was a stranger—a long-haired woman wearing a black robe and a velvet shawl. This woman in black had a delicate and pretty face, but that face carried a hint of sadness.

Panting, Thales finally calmed his breathing.

The woman—who wore black and had long hair—held his arm. "It is alright, let us leave first."

Puzzled, Thales turned towards Jines who was trying hard to subdue Queen Keya.

"Thales!" Jines yelled, gritting her teeth. "I will settle the matters here. Leave with the princess first. Quick, get out!"

'The princess?'

However, before Thales could think much of it, the long-haired woman clad in the velvet dress pulled him out through the door of the room.

Behind him, Keya struggled harder and harder. She was yelling madly, "Guards! Guards! Quick! There are assassins! Assassins!"

Pulling Thales whose face had paled, the velvet-clad woman quickly walked out, leaving only Keya's desperate voice ringing in the air far away behind them.

On both their sides, from time to time, maids and servants with solemn expressions would rush towards Keya's room.

It was as though they were used to such a scene.

Keya's shrill screams were still ringing in his ears, "Sob... My Luther- No, no! Your head... sob... Why can I not put it back? Why can it not be reattached? Why does it keep falling down? Why?!"

"Glue it together! It will be alright if I glue it together! Luther, is this not right?"

Thales only walked forward with a pale face. He felt that what was happening behind him was too cruel. He did not dare to face it.

It was only until Keya's voice disappeared far behind them that the two of them stood still at the corridor.

Still in a state of shock, Thales looked behind him.

The woman said softly, "Sorry. Usually, Keya's attacks do not happen so soon."

Thales looked behind him in a daze. Puzzlement slowly began appearing in his heart.

Thales raised his head and looked towards the woman, then said with great effort,

"That year, when Luther and Lydia... my brother and sister were assassinated... the queen and the others such as Madam Jines... were they there? Did they witness it with their own eyes?"

After staying silent for a few seconds, sorrow appeared in the eyes of the woman in black and velvet.

She said slowly, "Yes, that day, Prince Luther was... at the spot..."

The woman shut her eyes tightly. As she was immersed in her memories, she spoke with some breathing difficulties, "Jines and I rushed over after hearing the noise, but we were both too late. It was said that his head rolled under the bed..."

"Princess Lydia was kidnapped. Jines snatched a horse and chased after her. I ran to notify the guards, leaving the stunned Keya alone in the room."

Thales exhaled deeply. He suddenly had the answer in his mind. 'I see. That day, we encountered assassins on the way to Renaissance Palace. Jines' reaction was so abnormal... She even startled the assassins—who were actually not targeting me—ahead of time.

'Is this the reason why? They all experienced... such a scene?

'This is why... Jines lost her composure to that extent, and hated assassins and killers so much.'

The woman gently smiled at him and said with great sentimentality in her voice, "But you do not have to be afraid, Thales... Queen Keya has been like this for many years. When she is sane, she is always hysterical, and full of hatred. In contrast, she is quiet and kind during her attacks. She would only think that Luther and Lydia are still beside her, hopping about and playing..."

The woman's expression slowly became dreary and grim.

"After the tragedy happened that year, the palace was in chaos. Even King Aydi and Prince Midier were... The guards were so anxious that they drew their swords out whenever they saw someone... So, no one was able to care about this place. All the servants had escaped.

"Only Keya desperately hugged the prince's dead body and refused to let go... It was

said that she locked herself in the room..."

"I was forcefully kept apart in the safe house by the guards... The nobles were extremely frightened. They sealed up Renaissance Palace and locked up Eternal Star City... When King Kessel took control of the kingdom and stabilized the situation, it had already been two weeks later." The woman sighed and lowered her head.

Thales sighed softly.

"During those two weeks, Keya zealously defended the room, hugging the dead Prince Luther and crying, surviving on the water in the vase... You know, after two weeks, the prince's dead body had..."

Following the woman's description, Thales tried to imagine the scene from that time. A chill immediately ran down his back.

"When they broke open the door to the room two weeks later, we saw Keya. She was barely alive and almost unconscious, and in her bosom..." The woman heaved a long sigh. Her face was filled with trepidation. "That scene was practically like a nightmare."

Thales swallowed, not daring to imagine the scene anymore. 'For Jadestar Royal Family... The Bloody Year... Was something like this? To live for Constellation... is this the price?'

There was silence... until Thales suddenly registered the situation.

He raised his head and looked in puzzlement at the velvet-clad woman before him.

'Oh, yeah. Just now, Jines called her— The princess?'

'Going by her age, she is probably not Kessel's daughter. So princess means that...

'But didn't I see the late king's youngest daughter, Kessel the Fifth's little sister, the eldest princess, Constance Jadestar in the Jadestar family tomb?'

Questions popped up in Thales' heart.

"So, may I know who you are...?" Thales carefully asked.

"Oh. The 'princess' title must have confused you." Being considerate, the velvet-clad

woman resolved Thales' awkwardness. She lowered her head shyly.

"My family name is not Jadestar, and I am not a real princess." This 'princess' shook her head lightly.

"I am only the late king's adopted daughter. You can say that I am your half-aunt."

Thales opened his mouth in shock.

"I am Elise Sora, and am a little younger than Constance." Princess Elise smiled slightly. A charming dimple appeared on the side of her cheek. "However, I do not have the right to use the Jadestar family name... Sora, this is my husband's family name."

'Half... aunt?

'Why did no one mention it before this?'

"May I know who your husband..." Thales spoke in a stiff manner.

Hearing that, Elise sighed and spoke, "Count Sora... an honorary count from the late king's era. He just passed away a month ago."

'A widow?

'No wonder she's wearing black... Is she still mourning?'

Thales spoke in puzzlement, "A month ago? The passing of an honorary count? Was it because of illness...?"

However, Thales realized that he was a little rude. He immediately bowed and apologized. "Sorry, aunt Elise. It was presumptuous of me."

Princess Elise was at first stupefied. She then smiled bitterly and spoke, "No, there is nothing to hide..."

The adopted daughter of the late king, Princess Elise spoke slowly.

"He died in that huge explosion at the center of Red Street Market a month ago."

'Red Street Market... Huge explosion?'

Thales immediately froze.

'Could it be that...?'

"It was the night the gangs were fighting in XC District and Western District," Elise spoke sadly.

'Yes. I knew it.

'It was the explosion me, Yodel and Asda triggered.'

He immediately felt guilty.

Thales exhaled.

He forced down the unhappy feelings in his heart and asked slowly, "He... Your husband... why was he in Red Street Market that night?"

'Wasn't there a curfew that night?'

However, Elise obviously did not know much. She heaved a sigh.

"Our relationship is not really good. My husband... likes to seek pleasure in Red Street Market... A few days before he passed away, I went there to look for him and we had a huge argument. He did not come back for three days after that...

"I never thought that it would be the last time I saw him."

Elise shut her eyes, shook her head, and sighed.

She tugged the velvet shawl on her shoulders, which was used for keeping her warm.

However, at this moment, Thales' pupils suddenly contracted!

'That velvet shawl... looks a little familiar.

'Velvet... Woman... Red Street Market... A few days before the huge explosion... Looked for husband... argument...

'Could it be that she is...?'

Thales' entire body trembled greatly!

He looked towards his aunt Elise's face again.

This time, his aunt's delicate and pretty face completely overlapped with another face that seemed have come from an event that happened in the distant past.

'It seems like it had happened so long ago that I almost forgot.

'Yes. It's her.

'That female noble clad in velvet.'

Thales stared blankly at that princess.

'That day, it was her.'

She was the one who was clad in velvet and brought along twenty Swordsmen of Eradication. She met Thales, who was taking a risk and begging at Blood Bottle Gang's territory in Red Street Market.

She was the one who donated twelve coppers and... one silver coin on the spot to the unkempt Thales.

However, Thales' transformation was too great. She probably did not realize that the second prince in front of her was the same child beggar from a month ago.

Thales touched his chest.

The scar burned by Quide using that silver coin was there.

Because of that donation, the seriously ill Coria survived typhoid fever.

Because of that donation, Ned ratted them out to Quide.

Because of that donation... he... the child beggars... Quide... Jala... Red Street Market...

Because of that donation... everything else followed...

Thales heaved a deep sigh.

"What seems to be the matter?" Princess Elise looked curiously towards Thales, who had a complicated expression on his face.

"No, nothing much."

Thales raised his head and flashed a respectful but cautious smile.

This aunt suddenly seemed a lot friendlier in his eyes.

"I'm just a little emotional after meeting a relative."

Asda Sakern's smile flashed in front of his eyes again.

'Is this the coincidence you spoke of?

'Or-' The desolate figure of the robust Kessel in the royal family's burial ground appeared in front of Thales' eyes. 'Is this the will of fate?'

.....

XC District. Underground market. Sunset Pub.

"Cast it off.

"Just pretend that it is a piece of wood.

"Cast aside useless emotions and principles, and become a true Charleton!

"Cast it off!"

'No. No!'

Jala Charleton abruptly woke up from her nightmare!

She shot up from the bed gasping.

She remembered that after the three child beggars were taken away, she knelt down at Sunset Pub and did not get up for a long time until she lost consciousness.

And now...

"So disgraceful."

On the other side of the bed, which was the corner of the room, a hoarse voice that Jala was extremely familiar with rang up.

"Do you have that nightmare every single time you are upset?"

Jala sighed heavily.

"Old man, when did you come back?"

She shut her eyes and laid back down on the bed.

However, that voice did not have the intention to reply her.

"Jala Charleton, if you cannot look back and face your trauma from that year, you can only be a weakling forever."

Jala opened her eyes. She then pursed her lips and turned to face the wall, turning a deaf ear to the old man's words.

"Who would have thought that even Roda could render you powerless to fight back...? What a waste of those two good knives for killing..."

Jala thought of the three child beggars, who were taken away, as well as Coria's heart-wrenching plea.

"Sister Jala..."

She shut her eyes tight and fought back the tears in her eyes.

However, the old man's words were still travelling into her ears. "One single trauma made you shut yourself to this extent. You are just like that Quide... That year..."

The nightmarish memory came.

Jala could not take it anymore. She flipped out of the bed and yelled furiously at the corner.

"Enough! You don't have to remind me anymore!"

The old man laughed in a deep voice.

"Hehehe... remind you of what? Hmph, look, you are so traumatized that you don't even dare to mention it..." the old man continued mocking her.

A clunking sound rang, giving Jala a good scare.

She knew that it was the sound of the old man playing with the blade with his fingers.

Although she felt a little weak, Jala stood up indignantly.

"Hmph, you sound as though you are saying that if I mention it, I will immediately become a supreme class elite."

The old man continued speaking mysteriously, "Who knows? However, if you continue escaping from it, you will definitely not be able to reach supreme class... and what happened yesterday will still repeat itself.

"The Charleton family name will still imprison you all your life like a curse.

"Do you really want the nightmare of that man to rule you for the rest of your life or do you want to experience your powerlessness and weakness again?"

Jala opened her mouth and took in two deep breaths.

"How is this difficult?" She gritted her teeth. "It's just that incident."

"Oh? What incident?" The old man's voice started to gain a little lilt.

Jala's face was distorted. The room made of stone appeared before her eyes.

'It won't do.'

She started trembling.

'It won't do.'

Darkness and blood spread in front of her eyes like current.

'It won't do.'

Her teeth started chattering.

'It won't do.'

She almost could not breath.

'It won't do.

'I must not recall... '

However, the next moment, a small figure appeared before her eyes.

It was a cocky brat with black hair and gray eyes. Although his body was covered in wounds, he was over-confident and spoke firmly to her.

"I will go by myself."

Jala opened her eyes and sucked in a mouthful of air.

In her mind, she returned to that room made of stone.

Trembling, she started speaking.

"Twelve years ago, at Renaissance Palace..."

Her forehead broke out in cold sweat.

Ting! In the air, the sound of the old man flicking the tip of the blade rang.

The old man spoke coldly, "Continue speaking."

Jala grit her teeth hard. Her face became paler and paler.

"During my first- first mission..."

Jala's entire body started trembling uncontrollably.

However, the sight of Roda gripping her knife with a calm expression and taking away the three child beggars appeared before her eyes.

That was... Coria's pleading gaze.

"I..."

Jala shivered. She felt nauseous.

"I..."

Jala could feel that there was some liquid flowing out of her eyes.

"I..."

Everything in front of her eyes became bright red in color...

'So... scary... '

Jala stuttered. Her lips could not touch each other.

At that moment.

The old man yelled violently!

"Say it!"

Jala's whole body trembled greatly.

What followed was a streak of silver light that shot rapidly towards her!

Clunk!

A Wolf Limb Blade was embedded into the wall, half an inch away from Jala's left ear.

Jala shuddered violently!

All the scenery, people, sound, and colors from that day vividly appeared before her eyes again!

"That day, I-"

Her eyes were blank. She could not help but roar loudly.

"I beheaded a baby while he was alive!"

After roaring out those words, Jala panted and took large mouthfuls of air. She felt that the energy in her entire body had left her.

Twelve years had pass.

She managed to shout it out.

She finally managed to shout it out.

Thump!

Trembling, Jala directly threw herself on her knees. Covering her mouth and holding back the nausea and queasiness, she wailed.

At the corner, the old man's voice rang airily.

"Now, pick up your knife, your own knife.

"And not Charleton's knife."

Chapter 79

Diplomat Group

Three days later.

It was just snowing at Eternal Star City this morning. The roads of the city were stained with mud.

But the road in front of Mindis Hall was swept clean.

A few carriages were already arriving one after another.

"We are in a bit of a rush. People are saying that Archduke Lampard has yet withdraw his troops. He is still deploying his soldiers around the border. It is unknown if King Nuven has chosen to not restrict him or that King Nuven is unable to restrict him anymore."

Gilbert, along with the well-dressed Thales stood in the study room located on the second floor. They were both looking at the carriages coming through Mindis Hall's entrance from the window.

Gilbert said with a serious expression on his face, "It seems like conflicts aimed to test your stance cannot be avoided. Even though Baron Murkh and Lady Sasere are going to serve as garrisons in the forts while the Zemunto and Friess Family also promised to give their full support, I heard that after receiving news of the duke's imprisonment, Cold Castle and Arunde's vassals are in a state of chaos... It is better for us to arrive earlier in order to eliminate the disaster of war."

Thales lightly nodded his head as he listened to Gilbert's report in silence.

"According to usual practice, as Constellation's prince, Your Highness, you will need three instructors to respectively guide you on military affairs, political affairs and etiquettes. You will also need one attendant, who will usually become your assistant hereafter, and two protectors..."

"But since your diplomatic mission will arrive soon... we can only keep everything

simple and make up what you lack by the time you return to Constellation.

"Since the place you are heading to is the unfamiliar Eckstedt, and the aim of this trip is to apologize, we have no other choice than to reduce the number of followers you have. Apart from thirty Jadestar private soldiers lead by Chora, there are three special candidates.

"There is one instructor—I will introduce an extremely knowledgeable scholar to you later, as the vice diplomat of this trip; one attendant, which has already been chosen and is currently in the carriage; one protector—since your safety is very important, the protector must be an experienced supreme class expert..."

Thales could not help but to feel stunned when he heard this.

"The candidates for instructor and protector... Gilbert, do you mean that you, Yodel and even Jines... will not accompany me on this trip?"

Gilbert smiled at him helplessly.

He said faintly, "Yes. I am the signatory of the Fortress Treaty, and I have an infamous reputation in Eckstedt as a 'conspirator'...My appearance in Dragon Clouds City will only bring upon unnecessary troubles to you.

"As for Yodel..."

Gilbert shook his head. "For the past ten years in Northland, there have been five strong, supreme class warriors with outstanding reputation, commonly known as the Five War Generals. Each respectively worked under King Nuven and the few archdukes. Their status is similar to the Three Commanders of Constellation, who wield the legendary anti-mystic equipment. Your Highness, if you happen to meet any one of them, please do not mention the 'elite who wears a dark purple mask' and also the fact that he is now the secret protector of the Supreme King of Constellation."

Thales was momentarily stunned.

After a month of education, he knew about Constellation's Three Commanders... but as for Eckstedt's Five War Generals...

The former Foreign Affairs Minister sighed. "Yodel... has offended every single one of them..."

Thales spent a second to understand that sentence, then his face twitched as he replied, "Every... every single one of them? What kind of offense did he commit?"

Gilbert only glanced at him in silence.

Thales took a deep breath and put on a resigned smile. "Alright... I guess it is the kind that is more troublesome..."

Another question was added in the prince's heart.

Yodel's past.

What exactly did he do to provoke all of the Five War Generals at the same time?

It was just like a person who set himself against the Three Commanders at the same time... It was totally unimaginable.

Gilbert glanced out of the window and saw a few people walking down one after another from the carriage. "As for Madam Jines... Her identity is rather sensitive... you know, her relationship with the king..."

Thales sighed. "According to what you have told me, besides the 'allies' from Corleone Family, I probably will not see any familiar faces around me, am I right?"

Gilbert became reserved. "This is the exact matter I was about to bring up. Are you really going to bring members of the Corleone Family along with you?"

Thales replied with a solemn expression, "I have already made a promise with them. I do not like to go back on my word."

'Also, even though that old witch, Serena is annoying, she did use the Blood Clan's telepathic ability to help me during a crisis. It is not an exaggeration to say that she saved my life.'

Thales furrowed his brows. "After all, they have one supreme class expert and two supra class experts. Serena also hopes to realize the restoration of her position by relying on my status. These are all bargaining chips that I can take advantage of. On the way to Northland, they can hide among the followers by changing their appearance..." He paused slightly and thought of that robust figure. "Also..."

"His Majesty has already agreed to this, did he not?"

Gilbert exhaled lightly. "Of course, that is the promise of Constellation's prince... It is Jadestar's promise. They will not dare to be too presumptuous when in Constellation as the king and our forces are always by your side, but when you are in Eckstedt... I hope they will not bring about any trouble.

"After all, Yodel and I will not be by your side." Gilbert furrowed his brows. "You have to be careful of that old butler, Chris... I always feel like I have heard of his name from somewhere."

Thales rolled his eyes at Gilbert. "Hey, do not forget who was the one who facilitated this alliance."

Gilbert gave him a perfect smile and tipped his hat.

Thales' expression became worried. "Also, Gilbert, the matter I mentioned to you yesterday... about Lower City District..."

Gilbert breathed out from his nose. "Yes, Your Highness, since your identity no longer needs to be kept a secret, and Mindis Hall has already resumed its free passage... I have already sent someone to Lower City District yesterday afternoon. We will get a report back, latest by tonight. It is not easy to blend into that place. People from the Secret Intelligence Department are more suitable than us in investigating the matter regarding those beggars and that female bartender.

"I will update you on the latest situation by corresponding with you. I believe you will already be on your way by that time. If possible, I will do my best in taking care of them, even if we almost have no manpower in Lower City District."

"Thank you." Thales looked at the former Foreign Affairs Minister gratefully. "This way, I have no need to go to Morat anymore."

"But you have to understand..."

Gilbert hesitated slightly, but he still lifted his head and said, "What the Black Prophet said was not entirely unreasonable, Your Highness. After all, you are different from them."

Thales' gaze became still for a moment.

"Furthermore, it may not be a good thing for them to be too close to you... Your help may be entirely useless to them. Worse, it may even bring upon disaster."

Thales kept quiet for a while before putting on an ugly smile.

"I know."

'I know.'

He nodded and exhaled, then he turned around and adjusted his collar.

"Midira! Are you ready? It is time to go."

A strange but faint noise of metal chafing against each other sounded through the door from outside.

Midira Ralf was walking on a pair of weird metal prosthetics when he staggered into their field of vision. He bowed slightly towards Thales in a manner that failed to meet the standard requirements.

Gilbert raised his eyebrows a little.

Half of Ralf's face and his neck were covered with a strange silver mask, and the mask shielded the knotted flesh on his throat as well as the tattoo on his face. However, what was even stranger were the pair of prosthetics underneath his knees.

Constellation had a good relationship with the dwarfs of Steel City, even the skills of Constellation's smiths had increased greatly thanks to them. It only took two days for the capable royal craftsman to build a pair of simple prosthetics for Ralf. The prosthetics were made of two pieces of durable and flexible steel plates of excellent quality. The steel plates were bent into an L-shape, then moulded into a flexible J-shape with Crystal Drops infused into the curves to strengthen those parts. A fixing plate was made to connect to the knee, and it was fastened onto his belt. This way, Ralf managed to walk without using his crutches.

Of course, his movements during a battle such as dodging and changing directions would have to depend on his own, wind-controlling psionic ability.

Thales raised his eyebrows. "Not bad, but the parts below your knees are very distracting... Next time, do cover them up with your pants."

Midira Ralf lowered his head and pulled out a stack of papers that were stapled together.

Gilbert suddenly realized that Ralf was not hesitating. Instead, he was flipping through the papers in his hands and searching for the right sign.

Ralf clumsily found the drawing he wanted. He then looked towards Thales and raised his right fist. At the same time, he bent his wrist and swung his hand down lightly twice.

'Yes.'

Thales smiled slightly. "Very good, what you still lack is proficiency in both your sign language and your prosthetics. As it happens, we can continue your course on the way there."

Ralf smiled and found another paper before making another sign.

'Thank you.'

Gilbert sighed. "Since you have already decided to follow His Highness to Northland, to Eckstedt... I hope you will learn about the difficulties of this current trip, and do your best in protecting His Highness."

Ralf lowered his head slightly. This time, he did not need to flip through his notes, instead, he remembered the right sign and gestured it.

Gilbert furrowed his brows in confusion and finally turned towards Thales, feeling clueless.

Thales laughed as he replied, "He said he will try his best."

Gilbert exhaled and shook his head in resignation. "Alright, at least, this is a good method to transmit secret messages..."

This Psionic with the background of a gangster who they rescued from Vine Manor... no, he was of supra class. Although he was still very immature in battle, but strictly speaking, he could already be considered as a Psionic Warrior... What exactly had happened that made him to submit to His Highness so compliantly?

Thales waved lightly and snapped his fingers.

"Very good, let us begin our journey."

...

The main entrance of Mindis Hall.

"How have you been recently, my old friend?"

Before a few carriages, Gilbert extended his hand and tightly shook hands with a thin man, who was the leader.

"Very bad." The thin man's expression was sour. "Eternal Star City's administrative efficiency is far behind Western Desert's frontline military camp. I came to the capital for the documents of the grand library, but I lost my senior pass one month ago. So, I could only wait in the capital until now... Then, they told me that it would take half a year to replace the pass."

"I guess you probably used up all of your travel expenses, which is the reason why you came to me..." Gilbert replied with a smile.

"But you have given me such a troublesome assignment..." The thin man sighed and sized Thales up with his gaze.

"You also do not want me to give you the money directly, am I right?" Gilbert moved sideways to reveal Thales' figure.

"This is Lord Putray Nemain from the Cawing Crow City of Western Desert Hill. We studied under the same home tutor before." Gilbert introduced the forty-year-old man, who spoke in a blunt manner towards Thales.

"Putray was once a bard who wandered and travelled across more than half of the world. He is very knowledgeable on the geography of peninsulas and also social customs of various countries. He also spent quite some time in Northland. Your Highness, you once complained to me that you did not know much about the world, so I believe Putray is a great candidate. He will be your vice diplomat as well as your instructor, and he will follow you on the way up north.

"Putray, this is the second prince, Prince Thales. His intelligence will surprise you."

From his expression, the thin man, Putray did not seem like he was happy about this. Nevertheless, he lifted up his right fist and placed it before his chest and bowed before Thales.

"It is a pleasure to have the chance to learn from you... Putray, can I call you by your name?" Thales returned the greeting with a smile on his face.

"Of course, you are the prince. You can call me whatever you want." Putray shrugged nonchalantly. He did not show any signs of excitement and respect in meeting Constellation's only prince.

"Sorry, he has quite the odd personality, but I believe you will admire his scholarly knowledge and his rich experiences," Gilbert laughed as he said to Thales. He was not even the least bit worried that his old friend's irreverent attitude would bring about the second prince's aversion.

Thales stared at the thin Putray, and then glanced at the highland boots on his feet. Thales did not show any emotions on his face, but he sighed deeply in his heart.

'This is fate. It is him.'

That day when Quide went mad, the people of the Sixth House met a thin man wearing highland boots at Western City Gate, whose face was sour. He was unwilling to give them money. Hence, Ryan and Kellet decided to teach him a "lesson" by stealing the only card he had on him.

It was the pass for the Jadestar Grand Library.

At the time, Thales thought he was an abject scholar.

Thales rolled his eyes out of the others' sight. 'I am really sorry, Sir Putray. Your library pass is currently in one of the abandoned houses in Lower City District.'

Gilbert led him towards the next person.

This person was a young lad, who was about twenty years old with a sword fastened to his waist. His expression was firm and he had a tall, straight build. His face was normal, but he had a penetrating gaze.

Gilbert stared at the young man in front of him, his eyes were filled with complicated

and unreadable emotions. "This is a candidate decided by both His Majesty and me, and he will serve as your attendant, no matter in Northland's Eckstedt or after your return to Constellation. He just returned from the Tower of Eradication a few months ago—Wya Caso."

Thales reacted to this immediately. He stared at Gilbert in confusion. "Caso?"

"Yes, I hope this will not bring about aversion. After all, it is nepotism... But, I can vouch that he was the only elite left after going through many levels of screening." Gilbert sighed. "He is indeed also my son."

The young man, Wya Caso did not spare a glance at his own father as he bowed respectfully before Thales. "It is a pleasure to meet you, Prince Thales.

"My sword and intelligence will be used for you.

"For the rest of my life, I will serve you wholeheartedly."

Thales felt slightly awkward. Was it really suitable for someone to use the phrase 'for the rest of my life' during their first meeting?

Despite that, he still nodded in response with a joyful expression. "I will rely on you throughout this journey then, Wya."

Wya lowered his head in respect. "My life and my body are yours to use."

Thales once again rolled his eyes in his mind.

'Gilbert was obviously very good at socialising, but why is his son...

'His son is a little... should I say, too serious, or is he just plain silly?'

Nevertheless, he could also feel that Wya was seemingly not on good terms with Gilbert.

A cold father and son relationship?

Gilbert sighed and continued to move forward with Thales.

This time, Thales did not need any introduction when he saw the figure underneath

the cloak. He yelled out in astonishment, "It is you!"

The petite figure underneath the cloak turned around with her hands on her waist.

"Yes," she replied in a carefree manner. Her response was not respectful or cold and callous, but it made people feel that she was genuine. "It is me!"

With his face devoid of any emotions (it appeared that he became this way after meeting his own son), Gilbert said, "You have probably met her before. Similar to Yodel, originally, she was one of His Majesty's secret protectors. His Majesty specially transferred her—"

"Hey, hey, hey! What do you mean by transfer! Kessel can never order me around!" The cloaked lady who hid her face cut Gilbert's speech off. With no trace of politeness, she walked towards Thales and stared at the dumbstruck prince. She patted his shoulder with her left hand as she pointed her right thumb towards herself.

"Brat, my name is Aida!"

"Aida?"

Thales was momentarily stunned. "Ada Wong [1]?"

Thud!

Under the sour expressions of Gilbert and the rest, Aida smacked Thales' head hard!

She blew a whistle as Thales rubbed his head, grimacing in pain. "What 'Wong'! I am not from the Mane et Nox Dynasty from the Far East... Listen closely, my name is Aida Laura Carter Gisele..."

Aida appeared to be encountering some obstacles. She could be seen desperately scratching her head for a few seconds.

Finally, the cloaked lady put down her hand powerlessly as she said in disappointment, "Haih, never mind, my name is far too long. Sometimes, I cannot even remember it... Just call me Aida, then."

Thales was flabbergasted as he stared at Aida.

He felt that his serious outlook on life was refurbished.

However, this feeling of being knocked on the head... was very familiar.

A few familiar figures appeared before his eyes. He did not know how Jala and those few children were doing. He had only received some vague news from Morat.

Gilbert's face became pale with anger. "Madam Aida, please be careful with your actions towards His Highness the next time around..."

Thales rubbed his head, which was gradually starting to ache less. He noticed that even though Gilbert was obviously dissatisfied, it did not seem like he was about to hold her accountable.

'So, he also silently consents to her hitting a prince's head?'

Aida said in dissatisfaction, "What is wrong again?! Do not tell me that I cannot knock his head. Back then, when I knocked Mindis' head, even Keira did not dare to have an opinion..."

Thales froze as he noticed that Gilbert did not refute her statement.

'Wait a minute.

'Mindis? Keira?

'Which Mindis in the royal family?

'Keira. Was that the Royal Family's supreme class expert, "Enemy of the Wolves" Keira Jadestar, who was around over two hundred years ago?

'Her voice seems young, but... '

Thales lifted his eyes and looked at Aida. 'How old exactly is she?'

Thales smiled with much difficulty.

"Madam Aida... Haha, you are really... you are especially lively."

"You are right!"

Underneath the cloak, Aida seemed to be very happy as she punched her palm. "My entire family also says the same thing!"

"It is because of this that they kicked me out!"

Thales did not even bother hiding it when he rolled his eyes.

Gilbert forcefully coughed to attract the attention of the people around the carriages.

"Everyone, if there are no problems, you can get to know each other and acclimatize yourselves with one another during your journey... I believe everyone knows about the aim and mission of this trip.

"If there are no further questions, we shall proceed into the carriages now. His Majesty and a few dukes are waiting at the Northern City Gate to send the diplomat group off," he announced loudly.

Chora nodded and the thirty Jadestar private soldiers started busying themselves with their tasks.

Gilbert nodded towards Thales and sent him to his carriage.

The serious-looking prince's attendant, Wya Caso, was staring at the peculiar looking Ralf with an unpleasant expression. However, under the gaze of Thales' smiling face, he followed the Phantom Wind Follower and the second prince into the same carriage.

"Putray!"

Gilbert yelled at the thin man, who was boarding the carriage.

Putray turned around without any expression on his face.

The former Foreign Affairs Minister, Count Gilbert Caso, appeared solemn when he said, "I am handing over the prince and the whole of Constellation's future to you.

"You have traversed more than half of the world, from the battle of Crystal Wall City, the Bloody Year, the Desert War, the Alliance Civil War, the Riot between Steel and Tree, to Eastern Peninsula's Hanbol Inheritance War as well as the chaotic battlefield in Mane et Nox Regnum. You have seen numerous wars and chaotic battles. You know how brutal they were, and your current trip is to eliminate the threat of war on behalf

of Constellation—"

"Enough!" Putray cut his old friend off.

This thin man still had a displeased look on his face, but his eyes were glinting with a bright light.

"I have already accepted it.

"It is just the same as twelve years ago."

Translator's Notes:

1. Ada Wong: A character from Resident Evil.

Chapter 80

Nanchester's Suggestion

It was early morning on the road towards the Northern City Gate in Eternal Star City. A troop of city defense team's soldiers tactfully avoided a bunch of people standing in the vacant space ahead. They were also conscious in stopping other people from approaching the space.

"Be rest assured that I am not stupid enough to harm and kill the prince under the public eyes of the capital."

The Guardian Duke of the Land of Cliffs Region, Koshder Nanchester, was seen standing tall and upright in the middle of the road. He shook off the snow that covered the Great Deer Antler symbol on his cape as he said coldly, "I just want to meet him."

He stood in front of the continuous fleet of carriages and stared at the Jadestar Private Army, who had vigilant expressions on their faces while waiting for their master's reply.

Gilbert got down from the carriage and looked over at the Great Deer Antler carriage as well as few protectors of the Nanchester Family, who were close by. He also noticed that there was another carriage with a Tricolor Iris Flowers symbol, stationed at a distant spot. He furrowed his brows.

"Sir Nanchester, if you want to see the diplomat group off, you can wait at the Northern City Gate... Stopping the diplomat group halfway is not the sort of manner the suzerain of a land ought to have."

Koshder looked unhappy and he pointed towards the carriage a distance away. "I am not the only one. That Tricolor Iris Flowers brat is also here."

Gilbert immediately pondered over the current situation.

Koshder shook his cape impatiently. "We all know that he is not some normal child even though he is only seven or eight years old. Pass the news to the second prince and let him make the decision."

The voice of a young child could then be heard from the third carriage.

"It is alright, Gilbert! Let me handle this."

Thales pushed the carriage door open and with the company of both the anxious Wya Caso and the guarded Midira Ralf, Thales walked towards Koshder with a calm, composed look on his face.

Koshder looked at the child with a perplexed gaze and stuck his chin out towards the direction of the roadside.

Thales inhaled deeply and nodded. He gestured towards his attendant and the Phantom Wind Follower before following Koshder to the side of the road.

"What kind of drama is this again?" The vice diplomat of the group and the prince's instructor, the thin Lord Putray, got down from his carriage impatiently. It was as though his lovely morning had been disturbed.

Gilbert shook his head. "Internal struggle of the kingdom."

"Why is it so peaceful?" Putray squinted his eyes and looked over at the two different figures—the Duke of the Land of Cliffs and the second prince—who were standing in the distance.

"Peaceful?" Gilbert glanced at his old friend with furrowed brows.

Putray pursed his lips and sneered. "It is so peaceful that I almost want to cry. You should go to the Eastern Peninsula, to Kirin Holy Capital. See the internal fights of the Chen Royal Family with the eunuchs and officials, who were given honorary titles in the Mane et Nox Dynasty. Of course, you have never been there, so it is normal for you to have such shallow knowledge and experience on this."

Gilbert snorted resentfully as he could not seem to find a valid argument to refute Putray's words.

'Damned bard.'

Thales stared at the Duke of Great Deer Antler, who was wearing a hostile expression on his face while he pondered about the duke's intention.

'He must have some sort of motive for coming.

'But we are already destined to be enemies.

'I have to be vigilant.'

"I did not expect you to be the first person to come," Thales said quietly.

Koshder snorted.

"I did not want to meet you before so many people... since Fakenhaz's ridicules are very annoying." The One-Eyed Dragon stared coldly at him. "Brat, I know you are very intelligent, so I will cut the nonsense. Listen...

"I do not like you. Never before has anyone dared to call me a hypocrite."

Thales helplessly spread out his hands. "Then, what do you want me to call you? A liar? Deceiver?"

'Or... skilled actor? The best actor? The leader of the Mount Hua Sect, Yue Buqun [1]?

Koshder ignored his words. The scar on his blinded left eye was hideous.

"Nonetheless, I can still abandon my prejudice. In the future, the Land of Cliffs Region can fully support you to be the supreme king and suppress those restless nobles as well as suzerains with ulterior motives. The Great Deer Antler will serve you as our master, and Jadestar will continue to be the Royal Family."

Thales was momentarily stunned.

'What?'

Thales' brows wrinkled in confusion. "I thought the Great Deer Antler and I were already absolutely irreconcilable."

However, Koshder still did not pay any attention to him.

"There is only one condition," The One-Eyed Dragon said in an irrefutable manner.

Thales, who was frightened by the One-Eyed Dragon's abnormal behavior, let out a

sigh of relief. "As expected, you would never express goodwill to me for no reason."

"War comes with a price, and victory comes with rewards [2]." Koshder narrowed his only eye. "This is Nanchester Family's motto, spoken in our native language."

The second prince lifted his head to meet the One-Eyed Dragon's gaze.

"So, what 'price' do I have to pay in order to get your 'reward'?" asked the extremely vigilant Thales cautiously.

"It's very simple," Koshder said in a strict manner.

"King Kessel has to step down from his throne, and you are to be crowned the king in advance."

'Step down... coronation...

'Wha... What?'

Thales took an entire three seconds to understand what was just said.

Then, his face changed color due to agitation!

Koshder did not show any signs that he was joking, as he kept staring at Thales solemnly.

The two of them stared into each other's eyes for a full five seconds.

"Ha, how dare you attempt to incite discord between the only father-son pair in Jadestar." Thales laughed with his mouth wide opened. "Do you not know that the reason why I own everything I have now is all because of His Majesty... my father?"

"This is not an attempt to incite discord. This is a sincere suggestion and invitation." The One-Eyed Dragon's expression remained the same and his tone was serious.

"What we fear and hate is not Jadestar, or you. Our grudges are nothing when it comes to the kingdom. What we fear and hate is your father, the Iron Hand King."

Thales stared intently at the One-Eyed Dragon with bright eyes.

Koshder was unprecedentedly serious when he continued speaking, "Why do you think the New Star was established? Do you think that Arunde's actions entirely stemmed from his personal hatred and dissatisfaction? The suzerains were doing this out of self-preservation! In order for the families that have existed since the country was founded to this day, to continue existing—"

"Enough!"

Thales cut him off without a sign of hesitation.

'What a joke, this degree of provocation... '

Thales replied coldly, "I can only see all of you persistently persecuting my father, and the Royal Family that is suffering. Questioning my identity, obstructing me from getting the power and authority I deserve—"

The One-Eyed Dragon's suddenly appeared to be angry and cut Thales off with a loud yell!

He could be heard yelling, "Brat! If you can only listen to the story of the sorrowful king and the determined Royal Family, fed to you by the king's partisan, you might as well dig both of your eyes out and only leave your ears to do the job!"

Thales was stupefied for a moment.

The One-Eyed Dragon lightly exhaled a few times before saying to him word by word, "You underestimate your father, the Iron Hand King and underestimate the fear he brings upon the whole of Constellation."

Koshder slowly said, "Ever since the end of the Bloody Year, Kessel has become increasingly tyrannical. He is almost crazy about seizing power.

"From supporting the Duchess of Blade Edge Hill, who previously could only survive by relying on the Royal Family's prestigious reputation to indirectly controlling the two great clans of the southwest, then moving up to control Piranha of the Kingdom's Southwestern Coast and the wealthiest Sunflower.

"Then moving to breaking the rules and enlisting the Three Commanders as well as building the Royal Family's regular army to an astonishing scale.

"After that, he weakened each suzerains' Central Tax Bill, set up the Enlistment Bill, and greatly gave rise to the County Development Bill proposed by the new nobles.

"Not to mention his use of the National Conference, which is his favorite. He forced the suzerains to give in and hand over their power to the royal family by utilizing the pressure brought about by thousands upon thousands of public opinion. It was the same for the Desert War, and also the inheritance of the kingship. The combined voices of the suzerains during the Higher Parliament Meeting was useless. Only the king's voice and the cheers from the plaza could be heard when the final decision was made.

"He even wanted to interfere with the inheritance of the Six Great Clans and Thirteen Distinguished Families.

"There were even traces of his involvement in the internal fight of the Covendier Family two years ago."

Thales' heart trembled.

'What... is this?'

Koshder continued with a dark expression, "Do you really think that we do not care about Constellation's survival, especially when no one is willing to send out their soldiers for the king even though war is imminent?"

"Your father and his methods are too scary.

"If we let him do what he wants for another twenty years, he will completely swallow up the power, fortune, status, people and territories of all nineteen noble families... We can only surrender or be destroyed, or both... Constellation will return to imperialism! With the presence of such a king, how can we not be frightened, how can we not fight back, how can we not do our best to protect ourselves?"

Koshder's only eye was flaming with rage and he took an oppressive step forward.

"You saw... The Northern Territory was forced to rebel, Blade Edge Hill had several parts of its territory become property of the Royal Family. The strength of South Coast Hill was greatly weakened due to its family feud, Eastern Sea Hill was so terrified they became cowards, Western Desert just barely managed to protect itself due to the importance of the Western Battle Line." His gaze was stern yet solemn. "As for the Land of Cliffs Region, we do not want to resign to fate.

"New Star taking advantage of Eckstedt's power in restraining Kessel's royal power was the last method we could use besides taking up arms when we were forced to a dead end."

Koshder clenched his teeth tightly together. "It was a small matter that we failed to succeed..."

"But if Kessel continues to act willfully..."

Thales stared at the Duke of the Land of Cliffs in shock.

This was another version of Constellation's current situation that he heard.

It was totally different from the version Gilbert instilled into him.

Koshder's voice sounded mournful. "The Bloody Year changed him. Kessel became a true Emperor of the Empire. He wants to dominate everything in this nation.

"He treats every suzerain like his enemy and never shows mercy when he suppresses or schemes against them. He treats Constellation as his personal carriage, without controlling his usage of the horsewhip and spurs..."

"People whom he can take advantage of will become bargaining chips whereas people whom he cannot take advantage of will be suppressed or eliminated. Those who obey him shall flourish, and those who oppose him shall perish."

Thales was furrowing his brows tightly, recalling the few counts who questioned the king's power when the National Conference had just started.

"This is not something good, regardless of it is for us suzerains or Jadestar, or even the whole of Constellation..."

"If this continues, it will lead to a disaster sooner or later in this old nation!" Koshder gritted his teeth, his only eye gleamed as if there was lightning inside.

"You are heading to Eckstedt soon. This is not some good errand... But it will make you view Constellation from another perspective. Go and take a look at how the children of the Northern Wind and the Dragon see us."

Thales lowered his head as he tried to calm his own breathing.

"Why did Tormond decide to rule with the suzerains? Was it not exactly because after two generations of tyranny, the Empire fell to its own final demise?"

Thales opened his mouth, but then, immediately swallowed the word 'calamity' back into his stomach.

He had a feeling that the end of the Empire was not as simple as 'an attack from the calamity', something which Gilbert claimed.

Koshder turned around coldly and tugged his cape tighter around himself. "If your goal is just to become a tyrant like your father, disregarding the possibility of Constellation's downfall, just pretend that I did not tell you anything today."

The One-Eyed Dragon stared at Thales with a complex gaze. Thales was already deep in thought. "But what you said the other day... If you really care about Constellation's safety and stability, peace and prosperity... If that is your wish instead of only becoming the supreme king..."

"Then, my suggestion is always in effect."

Duke Nanchester spoke his last sentence before he turned around and left.

"Have a safe journey. Do not embarrass Constellation."

Thales stared at the departing One-Eyed Dragon in a trance.

'This person... '

This Koshder was totally different than the Duke of the Land of Cliffs at the National Conference, who coerced the king to appoint an heir.

Thales told himself, 'No. These are all ruses from the other party. Their motive is to ruin Kessel's image, to drive a wedge between me and my father... '

'Also... ' A voice from a very long time ago sounded in his mind.

"Moving from a feudalistic country to a country that practices absolutism with centralized state power is a road that almost every European country has to take..."

Nevertheless, Thales still clenched his fist lightly.

He lifted his head to watch Koshder, who was walking farther away, and also at Zayen Covendier, whom Koshder passed by.

"I hope I am not interrupting you." Zayen bowed gracefully.

Koshder replied coldly, "No. I will be perfectly satisfied if you stop being fooled by others, and stop thinking of me as the person behind the assassination."

Zayen's expression stilled as he watched Koshder walk into his carriage.

Thales, who was feeling a little faint due to how troublesome this matter was, sighed deeply. In a bad mood, he looked at Zayen and asked, "And what do you want?"

Translator's Notes:

Leader of the Mount Hua Sect, Yue Buqun: A character from The Smiling, Proud Wanderer.

The original version provided by the author in English was "War comes in price as victory comes in trophy", but it didn't quite make sense to us, so we tweaked it slight.

Chapter 81

The Way to the North

Zayen could be seen with a tranquil and calm expression on his face. "We just found out the truth about Vine Manor."

Thales' countenance remained unchanged.

After he went through what he did with Morat, he could also transform into the leader of the Mount Hua Sect, Yue Buqun.

Zayen gave the most perfect smile and continued speaking, "We interrogated the pawns of the gang at Vine Manor. I have no choice but to say...

"You played a good trick that day, Prince Thales." Zayen cast Thales a ruminating gaze. "Even in a hopeless situation, you were still able to drive a wedge between the Blood Clan and Blood Bottle Gang in order to avoid being killed."

Thales silently exclaimed in his heart, 'He finally found out about this.'

But currently, his thoughts were messy and disordered. He did not have the mood and effort to deal with the master of Tricolor Iris Flowers.

Thales spread his hands indifferently. "I do not know what you are talking about."

"Soon, you are going on a long journey... Be careful, the immortals are not easy to deal with." Zayen placed his hands behind his back, his smiling eyes occasionally glinting brightly. "Before the Enemy of the Wolves and his Immortal Hunters Group fought their way up to the summit of Wild Vast Mountain, forcing them to sign the 'Treaty of Subordination between Human Countries and Immortals', on numerous dark nights, the immortals fed on humans.

"They must have been yearning for the taste of human blood till this day... They will always bring upon problems in the human nation...

"If you share a boat with a jackal and wolf, you will run the risk of having your boat

overturned."

'This speech sounds so awe-inspiring and righteous... But since this is coming from your mouth...' Thales scratched his head.

He sighed. "I return what you just said back to you, original employer of the Blood Clan."

Zayen stopped smiling.

They stared at each other in silence.

Thales felt increasingly uneasy.

Zayen's gaze changed and suddenly he was smiling again.

"Nonetheless, I indeed owe you a favor."

Thales furrowed his brows a little.

Zayen laughed. "Thank you for the other day when you ran into that assassination attempt. Even though I know you were not thinking about being targeted in my place at all."

'Was he expressing goodwill?

'What day is today? Why is everyone expressing goodwill to me?

'Is today Children's Day?'

"No need." Thales was dispirited. "You have already repaid the favor by voting 'yes' to support me in inheriting the throne, did you not?"

However, Koshder's words from earlier immediately circulated in his mind.

"The suzerains were doing this out of self-preservation!"

Thales suddenly lifted his head and stared bemusedly at Zayen. "What were you thinking? Why did you cast your vote on me? You do not seem like the type of person who would simply change your stance just because you are angered by betrayal.

"Even if a Jadestar becomes the heir to the throne under that situation, it does not correspond with your benefits as a suzerain, correct?"

Zayen stared at him for three seconds and then, slightly raised his brows.

"Who knows? Since I also did not have a chance under that situation."

Zayen chuckled. "Maybe I was just thinking, 'Compared to those cunning people, the prince who is naive and inexperienced, is a better heir for the kingdom'...because no matter what, you were more like a pushover that would be easier to control."

Thales frowned.

'Can these dukes speak in a way a normal human can understand?'

"Just kidding!" Zayen laughed out loud.

Thales rolled his eyes.

"But before you leave, Your Highness, I have a gift for you. Please do kindly accept the gift." Zayen waved his hand lightly. "That day at Vine Manor, an old soldier of Starlight Brigade recognized you. However, it was because he did not utter a word that you managed to leave safely. Otherwise, what waited for you would have been... two supreme class knights."

Thales' heart trembled. He looked into the distance, at a man ridden with fatigue being roughly shoved into the Jadestar Private Army's fleet of carriages.

'Who... was that?'

Zayen patted his shoulder and gave him a mysterious smile. "You do not have to worry about him being my spy... Genard was once the Duke of Star Lake's personal guard. He should come in handy."

Thales had a skeptical look on his face.

But he once again remembered what Koshder said.

"The strength of South Coast Hill was weakened due to family feud..."

Thales muttered, "Duke Zayen, I heard that it has only been two years since you became a duke, right?"

Zayen furrowed his brows as he nodded. "Sadly, my father passed away two years ago. I returned from my travels in the Eastern Peninsula to inherit the title of the duke."

Thales was careful in his choice of words. "It may be presumptuous for me to ask, but I heard that... it was due to family feud that the old Duke of Iris Flowers..."

Zayen lightly held his breath as he maintained a perfect expression.

"Yes, my few uncles were lusting after my father's position. They used the excuse that my father was too oppressive to them... In the end, they became insane after they failed. So they made a risky move to pay a huge amount of money to hire an assassin and murder my father."

Thales sighed. "So, is this the reason why you said 'Eternal Star City does not welcome murder' on that day?"

Zayen inhaled lightly and nodded. "This can be considered as one of the reasons."

Thales fell into silence.

"There were even traces of his involvement in the internal fight of the Covendier Family two years ago..."

The prince recalled Kessel the Fifth's methods and means while he asked in a puzzled tone, "Your Grace, was your father's passing really due to internal strife, or is there another story behind it?"

Zayen was secretly astonished!

'He... This brat... '

"What do you mean?" the young duke could no longer maintain his expression as he retorted with a grim expression on his face.

Thales did not notice Zayen's expression. He lowered his head and continued to recall the possibilities of the Royal Family interfering with the inheritance fight.

"All nineteen noble families... will be completely swallowed up..."

The prince murmured, "Was there a deeper, more essential truth to the duke's death?"

"In order for the families that have existed since the country was founded to this day, to continue existing..."

"For example, the unfortunate death of His Grace. Was it needed to protect the continuation of the family, to protect the future of the next generation so that they would not be subjected to external infringements?"

Thales lifted his head, and with a penetrating gaze, he tried to make out something from Zayen's eyes.

"What do you think?"

In that very moment, it was as if something exploded in Zayen's heart.

His heart raced and his breath quickened as he stared at the second prince in front of him with his eyes wide opened.

However, there was a storm raging in his mind!

'Why did he intentionally mention my father's death?

'Continuation of the family...

'The life or death of Iris Flowers. He is a part of the royal family, so he must know that the first Duke Covendier, who was Constellation's first Chief of the Secret Intelligence Department and Chief of Intelligence, as well as the highest person in charge of "Operation World Cleansing" over six hundred years ago...

'So...

'The future of the next generation...

'Covendier's next generation... Was he talking about me or... Hille?'

The weather was freezing cold, but Duke Zayen Covendier, who had excellent self-restraint, broke out in cold sweat without even realizing it himself.

'Damn it...

'Regarding my father's death, regarding that matter... '

Zayen clenched his fist tightly. 'Regarding Hille's identity... What exactly does he already know?'

The young duke lifted his head and stared at Thales with brilliant, shining eyes.

'He is... threatening me.

'Warning the Iris Flowers.

'Damn it!'

Zayen's breathing became chaotic without him noticing.

Only then did Thales notice Zayen's ashen complexion and suddenly realize the truth.

'Er... Did I step over the line by asking about his father's death early in the morning?'

"Sorry." Thales smiled apologetically. "I was being too presumptuous."

With his eyes, he saw Zayen taking a deep breath and giving out a rare, forceful smile (smiling was normally nothing to him) that seemed submissive and obsequious.

Zayen felt bitterness in his heart, but he immediately closed his eyes and bowed down as he said with much difficulty, "No. Prince Thales, Tricolor Iris Flowers understands... understands your meaning. From this moment onwards, South Coast Hill is willing to serve and follow you without any complaints."

'Why did he bow down all of a sudden?'

Thales was shocked as he took a step back.

'I did not say anything, why did he want to bow down to me... Also, he already understands what I was trying to convey?'

'His reaction... is very fast.'

Thales squinted his eyes in suspicion. "Sir Zayen, do you really... understand what I was saying?"

Zayen clenched his teeth tightly together.

'Are you forcing me to make a promise?'

"What I said was whether that family feud was not that simple..."

"Yes! I understand!"

Zayen lifted his head abruptly and his eyes shone with resolve. "Covendier Family's teachings are very clear: It is better to die for friends than foes."

He stared at Thales in a serious manner. "I just figured out that you are right. If Iris Flowers wants to flourish more and more, we have to be careful in choosing our ally... For example, you, the only qualified Prince of Constellation, the bloodline of the kingdom."

'What is he doing?'

Thales furrowed his brows. 'Did another person take over his body?'

But Gilbert's voice came from a distance away—they had to leave now.

The second prince's fleet of carriages rode into the distance.

But Zayen was still standing at the same place in a daze.

Ashford, his butler, walked up from behind him. He was just about to say something before Zayen stopped him by lifting up his hand abruptly.

He only took action when the fleet of carriages disappeared into a remote distance.

Zayen was breathing unevenly when he nodded. "Alright, even a vampire's hearing is useless against such a distance."

Ashford furrowed his brows a little.

There was something slightly wrong with his master.

"Did you manage to get anything?" Ashford asked carefully.

Zayen scrunched his brows tightly together as he nodded out of habit. "When I asked about the matter regarding the Blood Clan, he instinctively verified it.

"The vampires are indeed on the journey with them."

Zayen let out a long sigh before he murmured, "He is indeed bold and fearless."

Ashford replied respectfully, "Then we will just act according to our original plan, inform Blood Bottle Gang and start destroying his reputation..."

"No!"

Zayen lifted his head with a determined gaze in his eyes.

There was even a hint of resolve in them.

Zayen glanced at the direction of the fleet of carriages carrying Thales as he squinted his eyes and made a decision.

'No one can harm Hille.

'No one.

'Not even the Kingdom's bloodline.'

Zayen Covendier, the young Jade City mayor, Guardian Duke of South Coast Hill, the master of Constellation's Six Great Clans' Tricolor Iris Flowers, whispered to the butler beside him, "Send word."

Ashford raised his eyebrows.

"Which side?" Ashford asked softly.

Zayen closed his eyes and took a deep breath before he slowly exhaled.

"That side," Zayen quietly said.

Ashford did not utter another word.

He was waiting for the final confirmation from his master.

Zayen's voice came through with much difficulty.

"You know which part to send those words to."

Even though Ashford had doubts in his heart, he immediately understood what his master meant as he was good in observing others' speech and behavioral patterns.

The old butler nodded and bowed before he left.

After a long while.

Zayen opened his eyes.

He mumbled to himself, "The Prince of Constellation, whom I voted for... You carry the fate of the two kingdoms on your back. You will decide whether we will have war or peace.

"At least, within the kingdom, probably none of Constellation's suzerains dare to endanger your life, right?

"This is probably... what everyone is thinking.

"Just let it remain that way then."

...

The carriage of the second prince arrived at the Northern City Gate.

From afar, Thales saw the piece of vacant land that the guards cleared. It was separated from the crowd, who came to watch the event.

The Supreme King of Constellation, Kessel Jadestar, was standing in the middle of the three dukes as he silently looked over at Thales' side.

"I will send you off here, Your Highness," Gilbert stood at his original place and said in a sentimental tone. "Be careful on your journey there. I will wait respectfully for your return."

Thales turned around and looked at Gilbert.

"If you can only listen to the story of the sorrowful king and the determined Royal Family, fed to you by the king's partisan, you might as well dig both of your eyes out and only leave your ears to do the job!"

Thales exhaled. "Thank you, Gilbert."

Then Thales took a step back and bowed.

"Thank you, teacher."

Gilbert was holding onto his staff when he lowered his head and sigh, but eventually he stopped uttering another word.

Thales exhaled. With Putray and Wya as company (it was better for Ralf to stay in the carriage with his appearance, though he did not know why the lively Aida did not leave the carriage), he walked off the carriage towards his father, who seemed to be a 'tyrant'.

The three dukes bowed before him.

Thales also returned the greeting respectably.

The plump Guardian Duke of the Eastern Sea, Bob Cullen was huffing and puffing when he sighed in admiration. "Your Highness, although this is unfair to you, I still want to let you know that I am extremely gratified at your courage."

Thales nodded absentmindedly. "It is what I ought to do as the Prince of Constellation."

"Eastern Sea Hill was so terrified they became cowards." Koshder's version of Constellation emerged in his mind.

The Guardian Duke of the Western Desert, the horrible-looking Fakenhaz continued with his ridicule. "Hehehe, I once hoped that my son would be as outstanding as you, Your Highness, but after I took a look at the current situation, I decided to just forget about it... This is far too dangerous."

Thales rolled his eyes in front of him.

"Thank you for your kind words," Thales replied powerlessly.

"Western Desert just barely managed to protect itself due to the importance of the Western Battle Line."

He walked towards the teenage girl.

Lyanna Tabark, the delicate and pretty teenage Duchess of Blade Edge Hill. She was staring at him with an icy expression.

"I think... we all know what kind of heavy burden we have to bear as the last person in the family," she said softly.

"But it is exactly because of this that we get to become even stronger," the teenage girl said bluntly.

"Blade Edge Hill had several parts of its territory become property of the royal family."

Lyanna delicately touched the Blood Moon brooch pinned on her chest and whispered, "Your Highness, since you are leaving soon, I am going to present to you the Tabark Family's motto."

Thales was stunned for a while.

The cold, teenage girl bowed gently and enunciated her words clearly, "Only blood can sharpen the blade."

Thales stared at the teenage girl in front of him, who was about fifteen or sixteen years old. He only came back to his senses after a few seconds and nodded his head solemnly.

"I will remember it with my heart and will never dare to forget it," he replied.

Thud!

The king's scepter struck the floor.

The three dukes—Cullen, Fakenhaz and Lyanna backed down at the right time.

Thales took a few steps forward and bowed lightly.

"You underestimate your father, the Iron Hand King and underestimate the fear he brings upon the whole of Constellation."

"You have met Keya," Kessel the Fifth quietly said.

Thales nodded.

"Very good, then you already know exactly what kind of path that we... you and I, are walking on." Kessel stared at him coldly.

"The Bloody Year changed him..."

Kessel sighed before he quietly continued, "We have enemies in every corner of this world. If you are not careful in your every step, disaster will fall on your head."

"He treats every suzerain like his enemy and never shows mercy when he suppresses or schemes against them. He treats Constellation as his personal carriage, without controlling his usage of the horsewhip and spurs..."

Thales sucked in a breath. In Kessel's eyes, he had a very determined gaze.

Kessel said slowly, "Head on your journey, young Jadestar. Bring honor to your kingdom and bring honor to your family.

"Live for Constellation."

Thales lifted his head and once again nodded lightly.

Jines Bajkovic, who was standing behind the king, could not help but take a step forward.

"Brat." The female official seemed a little awkward.

Jines eventually drew a deep breath and spoke, filled with complicated emotions.

"Remember to practice your sword skills."

Thales gave her a smile. "Yes, Madam Jines."

Putray and Wya bowed and greeted the king, with the latter saying a few words of

encouragement. Thales knew that the time of departure had finally arrived.

However, at that very moment, an unexpected person walked to his side, holding onto his walking stick.

"Your Highness, when you reach Eckstedt, please help an old man like me to pass a message to an old woman." With his hoarse voice and ugly smile, Morat Hansen spoke to Thales, who had a vigilant expression on his face.

With his bad impression of the Black Prophet, Thales asked dubiously, "Which old woman?"

Morat grinned. "You will know when you see her."

Thales furrowed his eyebrows deeply.

On the city gate, which Thales was not paying any attention to, a masked figure slowly disappeared into the air.

And so, the carriage fleet with the silver Double Cross-Shaped Stars Flag and Nine-Pointed Star Flag erected on them, slowly departed all the way up to the north.

Thales leaned against the wall of the carriage and exhaled. "Wya, do you know why it seemed like everyone was bidding their goodbyes for the very last time when they said their farewells to me?"

"Will King Nuven really kill me?"

He was not counting on Wya to reply him.

However, the second prince's attendant, Wya Caso, who kept staring out of the carriage, gently rose his head. His face was filled with complicated emotions.

"Your Highness..."

"During my time at the Tower of Eradication, my teacher once told me..."

The next second, Wya said something that made Thales' eyes brighten up.

Until a long, long time after, Thales would still occasionally think of these words when

he could not sleep at night.

Wya Caso whispered, "Treat every goodbye like the final goodbye, and treat every second of your life as though you managed to survive out of luck...

"That way, we will never waste our life."

Chapter 82

The Weeper

"Your Highness! You are truly beloved among them! The people did not forget that it was Constellation and the Jadestar Royal Family that guaranteed them such a bountiful life."

The speaker was Baron Limor. As the suzerain of four local villages, his castle stood at the point of intersection between those four villages. To the south, the Renaissance Avenue—which was situated in the Central Territory and was covered in yellow fallen leaves—could be seen. To the north, a panoramic view of the birch tree forest—unique to the Northern Territory—could be seen.

This was the fourth morning of their journey north to Eckstedt. They stopped a few times on their way to restock. If all went well, they would be able to enter the Northern Territory in the evening and reach Broken Dragon Fortress the following night.

Although Baron Limor was only over thirty years old, he was almost as plump as the old Duke Cullen. The Baron laughed to the point that his eyes could almost not be seen.

He spoke passionately to the second Prince of Constellation, Prince Thales Jadestar, who was surrounded by smiling members of the populace, "The people were looking forward to your arrival very much, and feel extremely honored. The continuation of the Jadestar Royal Family line is indeed a great show of love by the Sunset Goddess."

Baron Limor stroked his belly and said with a smile, "I believe that in the future, under your rule, Constellation will become even more bountiful and blissful. It will become even more successful than it used to be!"

"We are, after all, the descendants of the Empire!"

Thales walked along the clean, spotless village where even the mounds of snow were completely swept away. Maintaining the most standard of smiles, he waved at the people who were clad in bright and dazzling clothing.

Beside him, Wya, Chora and five Jadestar private soldiers anxiously separated him

from the crowd. Aida followed behind them, and judging by the way she walked, it was obvious that she was in low spirits.

The head of the Jadestar Private Army, Chora, said with a serious expression, "It is best that we leave immediately, Your Highness. Staying here is really not a good idea."

"He is right. Your duty is to serve as an envoy, not to conduct inspections. You are merely passing this place by." Wya stopped a squire in his tracks.

Thales nodded and casually made a few hand gestures towards the distance, which no one could understand except for one person.

'How is it?'

Looking at the prince's hand gestures, Wya furrowed his brows.

Displeased, he looked towards the other direction of the village. As expected, Ralf's figure appeared at a secluded place some distance away right at the perfect moment. Racking his brains, he made two hand gestures at Thales in reply.

'At the back. Fake. All of them.'

'Fake. Haih... '

Thales' heart sank. He looked towards the child who was nearest to him. The child was about seven or eight years old—around the same age as him.

The child had a dark complexion, and was so thin that he was only skin and bones. He was dressed in obviously ill-fitting clothes. His tiny hands could not reach out of the sleeves at all. His eyes were filled with fear, and he was shivering. However, he deliberately forced himself to flash a fake smile.

A man, who was in the prime of his life and had an apathetic gaze, waved his rough and deformed hand with difficulty.

A shy woman with a scarf on her head wore a shirt and a skirt that did not match at all in terms of style. The style of her shirt was obviously closer to the ones that are trending in the capital city.

An old man who seemed almost sixty was wearing a comical-looking cape that looked

like the ones used by nobles to shield themselves from the rain. The lower half of his body was dressed in thin, unlined pants. At a corner where others could not see, he shivered violently from the cold.

'And... The spotless village with everyone lining up on both sides of the street to welcome me.' Thales heaved a sigh and looked towards Baron Limor with a smile.

Did they think that he was an idiot?

'So, there is a Potemkin Village [1] in this world too.'

"We should have finished restocking by now." Again, Thales gesticulated at Ralf, which no one but he and Ralf could understand. He shook his head and said softly to Wya and Chora, "Let's go."

Wya even gave Ralf—who was a distance away and had a profound expression on his face—an angry glare. He then caught up with Thales together with Chora. He was the one who was supposed to be the second prince's attendant!

Despite Baron Limor's reluctance for them to leave, persuasions for them to stay, and his profusely gratuitous farewell, the carriage fleet of Constellation's diplomatic group that was heading north towards Eckstedt prepared to set off.

"I thought you enjoyed that feeling of being supported by the multitudes."

The vice diplomat of the diplomat group, Lord Putray, took out a tobacco pipe from somewhere and lit it. It produced a thick cloud of smoke which made people feel uncomfortable even just by looking at it. He puffed from it, and looked at the second prince mockingly.

"No, I would prefer to enjoy the kind of support that is undecieving and simple, but is sincere." Smiling, Thales took the water a guard passed to him. "And I would rather not watch as they are coerced by their suzerains to wear clothes that were prepared beforehand, force the most deliberate smiles, and tell me lies about their happy lives while lining up on both sides of the street for no reason at all in a village that has been swept beforehand, welcoming a prince that they do not actually like."

Thales sighed softly, "How many people among them do you reckon are smiling, but are actually full of hatred for me, a prince who suddenly appeared?"

"Not even one." Unexpectedly, Putray denied his words. "If you insist on finding some, it would probably only be that plump baron."

Thales raised his brows.

Putray scornfully heaved out a mouthful of smoke. "Don't think of yourself as too important, future king. In many people's eyes, the Nine-Pointed Star does not even carry as much weight as an ear of wheat. Wheat can fill their bellies. What can the Nine-Pointed Star do? Oh, there are still perks to it." Putray chuckled. "Take for example, their suzerain fed them a good meal and distributed some unwanted clothes to them so that they can welcome some heir of the Nine-Pointed Star who passed by with some semblance of decency."

Thales' expression was grave. Before entering the carriage, he had glanced at this village—which was on the border of the Northern Territory and the Central Territory—for the last time. He could not help but say, "This is the intersection point between Renaissance Avenue and the birch tree forest. The specialties of the Northern Territory and goods from the Central Territory both will pass by here. There is no shortage of land and hunting grounds, too. But the people here are still so poverty-stricken. Is it because too much of their pay is embezzled, or is it a problem with the land, or high taxes?"

Putray exhaled two smoke rings from his nose and said mockingly, "Let's put it this way. Baron Limor is one of the vassals under Count Talon. He collects taxes and responds to calls for enlistment on the latter's behalf. At the same time, the Talon Family is a distant relative and supporter of the Jadestar Royal Family. The exact reason why the villagers here are so poor is because the rulers of the territory are too patriotic and loyal to the kingdom."

Thales was silent for a while until Wya interrupted his ruminations.

"Your Highness, that veteran kept refusing to leave. He is now still following us." Wya pointed towards a limping figure behind them and sighed. "We have already passed by Talon Family's Ice River City. I reckon that the food and supplies he has are not enough for him to journey back to Eternal Star City. Moreover, he does not have clothing that can ward off the cold. The further we go northwards—"

"In my opinion, we can hand him over to that baron. This way, we do not have to worry about him starving to death or dropping dead on the streets." Chora ran his fingers

along his red hair.

"You saw how he was like. I reckon that the veteran is not good at dealing with nobles. And the baron will probably send him straight into the dungeons." Thales shook his head as he watched Genard's stubborn figure a distance away.

"And he was, after all... the late Duke John's personal guard. You can say that he is related to the Jadestar Family."

Thales' gaze sparkled. He thought of the late king's younger brother in the burial room.

[Starlight God of War, Liberator of Zodra, Duke of Star Lake, John L.K. Jadestar, 613-660]

"Then let's bring him along."

Thales looked towards his vice diplomat in puzzlement. Lord Putray realized in frustration that the fire in his tobacco pipe had gone out due to the cold again. He fumbled around his pocket in a flurry. Wya sighed, took out a piece of flint and walked forward.

"In my opinion, to have the willpower to follow us for three days and three nights on foot—thank you, you are a lifesaver—if he isn't the most loyal follower, he would be the most dangerous enemy."

Putray lit his tobacco pipe and looked towards the end of the carriage fleet, which was where the carriage with coffin was. Scornfully, he said, "No matter which one he is, you have a reason to bring him along and place him under your observation and control. There are all sorts of creatures in your disorderly carriage fleet anyway."

Thales furrowed his brows, pretending not to have heard Putray's complaints about having the Blood Clansmen as travel companions. "A loyal follower and a dangerous enemy. I don't feel like risking a bet on any of those two possibilities."

Putray sucked in a mouthful of smoke with great force and closed his eyes in satisfaction. "It's hard to tell. Sometimes, it is also possible that both apply."

Thales rolled his eyes in exasperation.

"Your Highness, how about that veteran?" Wya asked probingly.

Thales contemplated for a while. Suddenly, he walked towards the veteran from the Starlight Brigade. Behind him, Ralf quietly followed.

Wya was stunned for a moment. He then immediately caught up with the second prince. At the same time, he glanced unhappily at the Phantom Wind Follower. After overtaking Ralf, he instinctively took a step forward and became the person closest to the prince.

Wya felt that his position as the prince's attendant was seriously threatened by this silver-masked man who could only walk with the help of prosthetics.

For example, that sign language that only Ralf and the prince could understand, but not him, even though he was the attendant.

Thales shouted from afar, "Veteran! What is your name?"

Genard, who was hugging himself and shivering in the cold, raised his head. Seeing the Nine-Pointed Star embroidered on Thales' clothing, his eyes brightened.

He recalled the scene that year, when that lackadaisical, middle-aged duke walked out of the barracks for the first time, and straight towards him.

'Duke.'

"Ge-Genard," he said while shivering.

"Still not willing to give up, are you?" Thales narrowed his eyes. "However, you know, it is impossible that I will let you follow us. You were sent here by Zayen Covendier, and I do not trust him."

Genard was stunned. He immediately explained, "I am not from the same group as they are. I was captured by them... I don't know why they want to send me here either—"

"But it has been three days. Why are you following me?" Thales cut him off and stared straight at Genard's face. "Give me a reason to believe in you."

Genard stared at Thales in a daze. "True. He is, after all, not the duke. He won't believe in me.'

If it was the duke, he would probably have smiled mysteriously and tapped Genard's shoulder. In an extravagant manner, he would tell Genard to collect a serving of food and leave after saying a few words, "I will be watching you." He would then leave, reassured.

'However, it was precisely because of this personality that the duke... that... '

The veteran of over thirty years old gritted his teeth and raised his head, "When I was brought here, along the way I heard those people bringing me here saying that you—you were going to Eckstedt to calm down the fury and hatred of the Northlanders with your own life?"

Thales stared at him and did not say anything

Genard hugged himself and said while trembling, "Please let me follow you. Let me follow the Nine-Pointed Star."

Thales did not speak.

At the point when Genard was overwhelmed with anxiety, the second prince finally said slowly, "I heard that"—Thales exhaled—"you were once from the Starlight Brigade, and was Duke John's, my grand uncle's personal guard?"

Genard's gaze dimmed. "Yes."

'And I let him down.'

Thales coldly said, "If it is out of loyalty for Star Brigade's comrade-in-arms, you may go back to the capital city and continue serving my father, King Kessel."

Genard's face was covered in dust. As he gasped for breath with difficulty, he looked at Thales. "I have served him for twelve years in the capital city, but now, I have nowhere to go."

'True.'

That year, when the Starlight Brigade was disbanded, most people followed the captain to Broken Dragon Fortress and had three bloody battles with Eckstedtians. After the 'Garrison Contract' was signed, they continued guarding the border of Constellation in the bitter cold.

But he did not go. He wanted to stay and continue serving the Nine-Pointed Star and the Jadestar Family in the capital city. To atone for his sins.

But... Kessel...

Genard thought of his mind-numbing life in the city defense team, which went on for twelve years. He chuckled forlornly.

Seeing his expression, Thales heaved a deep sigh.

"Go and look for Chora, the one with the red hair." Under Genard's surprised gaze, Thales pouted. "Since you are a veteran, ask him to assign a position to you. The diplomat group cannot take in useless people."

Shivering, Genard stared at Thales. The man shuddered violently. Two streams of tears flowed out uncontrollably from his eyes.

Thales was taken aback. This was the type of situation he could not handle the most. He immediately turned and left.

This time, Wya followed closely. He did not forget to glance at Ralf, but Ralf was staring at the veteran whose eyes were brimming with tears.

'Another lost person... Just like me.'

Thales walked further and further away.

'If he was John's personal guard, if he participated in those battles, then he must have lived through the truth of the incidents behind the Bloody Year. Those truths that I want to know.' Thales thought.

The second prince entered the carriage without saying anything. The carriage fleet continued its journey, exiting Renaissance Avenue and entering the birch tree forest which was unique to the Northern Territory.

The next evening, when the carriage fleet with the Double Cross-Shaped Stars flag hung on it finally reached the border of the birch tree forest, snow began falling ceaselessly. Everything around them was becoming silvery-white.

When they stopped to rest, Wya lit a torch from the bonfire started by the guards. He

held it close to Thales, who was so cold that he was rubbing his hands. "Please pay attention to the temperature, Your Highness. From now onwards, unlike the capital city, snow not melting will become the norm."

"You came here before?" Thales gratefully took the warm torch and emitted a hot puff of air.

Wya chuckled softly. "I didn't just come here before. The Tower of Eradication is situated in the southwestern direction of the intersection point between Eckstedt and Camus Union, within the mountain range at the northern side of the Great Desert. At that time, the Desert War raged violently. The roads in the Western Desert were obstructed and I could only make a detour through Eckstedt from the Northern Territory to report for duty."

Thales' interest and curiosity was piqued. As he was about to enquire further, Putray walked towards them. "This year is a little colder than usual. Broken Dragon Fortress will only be colder than this." Lord Putray scooped up a handful of the thin layer of snow on the ground. His expression became grim. "It is good and bad news at the same time."

"How so?" Thales who did not know much about both the Northern Territory and Eckstedt, humbly asked the vice diplomat who was obviously experienced and knowledgeable, but was always blunt towards him.

"The good news is that the Day before the Bitter Cold Winter—which is weather exclusive only to the north—will come earlier than usual. No matter how good Eckstedtians are at battling during winter, it will be impossible for them to mobilize a large number of soldiers and form any sort of battle formations, or lay siege to the fortress in such weather where water freezes as soon as it is poured out. Their supply line would collapse from the bitter cold."

Putray then said in a contemplative tone, "The bad news is, if Lampard wants to take down Broken Dragon Fortress, these two days would be his last chance."

A chill ran down Thales' spine.

Amid Wya and Ralf's sullen expressions, Putray rudely snatched Thales' torch and extinguished it in the snow. "Yes, my prince, Broken Dragon Fortress is not far away. If you still intend to prevent the flames of war and not just wander around enjoying the

beauty of nature, you'd best hurry up and press onward!"

At that moment, the cloaked woman and secret protector, Aida—who had been in low spirits all the while—suddenly shuddered violently and sat up.

"That-there's someone—" Aida stuttered while dusting off the snow on her body.

But she was immediately cut off.

"Enemy attack!" A distance away, a voice yelled loudly and furiously! It was the veteran, Genard's voice.

Thales abruptly stood up. Wya, and Ralf—who was at his side—were even faster than him. One of them drew his sharp blade out of its sheath and the other shielded Thales behind his body.

"Chora!" Putray called calmly.

"Get into formation!"

As soon as Chora had furiously ordered, the thirty Jadestar Family's private soldiers shouted loudly. Their swords left their sheaths and their shields formed a wall surrounding Thales. They formed the Starlight Formation that was renowned in Constellation.

But Thales, pressed between and protected by his attendant and the Phantom Wind Follower, looked around in bewilderment at the evening landscape of the birch tree forest.

'Where are the enemies?'

In the next moment, he did not have to wonder anymore.

Indistinct figures suddenly appeared in a bizarre fashion behind almost every tree around them. There were at least twenty. A chill ran down Thales' spine.

He had seen people abruptly appear in this manner before. It was like... glitching frames in animated movies.

As if they were facing a formidable enemy, the private soldiers of the Jadestar Family

lit torches and passed them to a few key points within the round formation, providing a source of light. The flames illuminated their surroundings.

Figures dressed in luxurious clothing and armors (the two unexpectedly appeared at the same time on all their bodies) materialized one by one in the dim forest. There were both men and women, and every single one of them stood with tall, erect postures and were extraordinarily good-looking.

However, all of them were staring at Thales and his entourage coldly with sharp, piercing gazes, as if they were looking at prey that would most certainly die.

"Who are you?" Putray shouted calmly as he also whipped out his sword while holding a torch.

Under the surprised gazes of the Constellatiates, a graceful figure slowly walked forward elegantly and quietly.

It was a woman. It was the first beautiful woman Thales saw since he transmigrated. She was so beautiful she could steal a person's breath away.

How do you say it... she was breathtakingly beautiful?

She was wearing a well-tailored, black, formal dress which brought out the shape of her body perfectly. Her face was gentle, she had silvery bright hair, and a pair of endearing purple eyes that seemed as though they were glistening with tears.

If placed in Red Street Market, she would definitely be an existence that only high-ranking individuals of a duke's status could meet.

This adorable beauty whose age could not be determined, slowly parted her cherry lips. She, undoubtedly, had an endearing face. But at this moment, she spoke coldly like a robot.

"Ladies and gentlemen, good day. I am... Katerina Van Corleone. My enemies like to know me as the Weeper."

Everyone's breathing suddenly froze.

Thales immediately looked behind him towards the carriage with the black coffin in it. He was shocked and bewildered.

'Corleone? Katerina? The Weeper? Isn't that... '

But everything continued to unfold before him.

This beauty in black with an endearing and innocent appearance blinked her watery eyes, but her tone was bone-chillingly cold.

Her gaze became harsh, and she pressed her hands on her stomach before she slowly said, "Now, I order you all... to hand over my sister. And then all of you will sleep here eternally."

Translator's Notes:

1. Potemkin Village: Derived from a Russian, it is any construction built solely to deceive others into thinking that a situation is better than it really is. The term was originated from stories about a phony settlement built by Grigory Potemkin to impress Empress Catherine II during her journey to Crimea in 1787. (Source: Wikipedia)



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